



EAVS

Deep Dive

The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) administers the biennial Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) to collect state-by-state data on the administration of federal elections. In June of 2017, the EAC released the most recent survey with data from the 2016 election.

This survey contains the most comprehensive data about trends in election administration in the United States and provides these numbers at the national, state, and local level. This brief is part of a series of “deep dives” into the EAVS data that will provide an in-depth look at a variety of issues related to administering elections and use data to help better understand these issues.

Poll Workers and Polling Places

Overview

- During the 2016 elections, local election officials operated 116,990 polling places, including 8,616 early voting locations, across the country. These polling sites were operated by 917,694 poll workers.
- Nearly 65 percent of jurisdictions reported that it was “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers.
- There has been a continued decrease in physical polling places, which can likely be explained by the expansion of alternative voting options, the increased use of these options by voters, and the corresponding decrease in in-person voters on Election Day.
- More populous jurisdictions faced greater challenges when recruiting poll workers.
- Of the age data reported for approximately 53 percent of poll workers who served in 2016, 24 percent of poll workers were 71 or older and another 32 percent were between the ages of 61 and 70.

Polling places and the poll workers who run them are the front lines of American elections. According to the EAVS, during the 2016 elections, local election officials operated 116,990 polling places, including 8,616 early voting locations, across the country. These polling sites were operated by 917,694 poll workers.

Recreating this framework every election cycle is a massive undertaking, and election officials and policymakers are constantly looking for ways to strengthen the process. This EAVS deep dive examines data on poll workers and polling places from across the nation to support and inform these efforts.

Poll Workers

Recruitment, training, management, and retention of poll workers require constant and large-scale efforts by election officials. While EAVS data only scratches the surface of this challenge, the biennial survey does collect information in a few important areas, including the level of difficulty in obtaining poll workers and age of poll workers.

Difficulty Obtaining Poll Workers

Local election officials reported varying levels of difficulty obtaining poll workers for the 2016 elections. Of those who reported level of difficulty data on this question,¹ nearly 65 percent of jurisdictions reported that it was “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers. Approximately 31 percent reported that it was “somewhat easy” or “very easy.”

EAVS data shows that more populous jurisdictions faced greater challenges when recruiting poll workers. Of the 50 responding jurisdictions with the highest number of registered voters, 88 percent reported that it was “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to

EAVS 2016: Difficulty Obtaining Poll Workers

Level of difficulty	% of jurisdictions
Very difficult	13.9%
Somewhat difficult	50.7%
Neither difficult nor easy	4.2%
Somewhat easy	19%
Very easy	12.2%

obtain a sufficient number of poll workers. Only 12 percent of these jurisdictions reported that it was “somewhat easy” or “very easy.”

Comments from respondents also suggest that some local election officials faced difficulties recruiting poll workers in jurisdictions where party affiliation is a requirement for poll workers (e.g. finding Democrats to serve with their Republican counterparts in predominantly Republican areas and vice versa). Some local election officials also reported difficulties in recruiting poll workers with necessary language skills in jurisdictions that require or provide for poll workers who speak languages other than English.

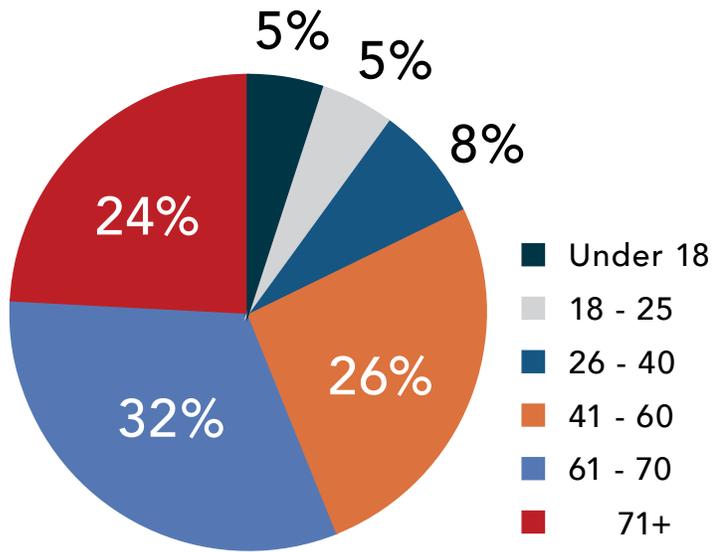
Age of Poll Workers

EAVS respondents reported age data for approximately 53 percent of poll workers who served in 2016.² Of those, the poll worker population is skewed towards older Americans, with 24 percent of poll workers aged 71 and older and another 32 percent between the ages of 61 and 70.

Young Poll Workers

Recruiting young poll workers has been a focus of policymakers and election

EAVS 2016: Age of Poll Workers



administrators for many years. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) sought to encourage high school and college students to serve as poll workers, and the EAC has supported these efforts since its inception.³ As highlighted in the EAC’s [Election Workers: Successful Practices](#) manual, young poll workers bring multiple benefits to polling operations. In addition to representing the next generation of poll workers, young poll workers are generally more comfortable with new technology, their energy and enthusiasm is often well received by older poll workers, and exposure to the voting process can stimulate interest in elections and help create lifelong voters.

Inclusive of jurisdictions that reported age data for their poll workers in 2016, nearly 10 percent of poll workers were aged 25 years and younger. At least five states exceeded this national average, including California where roughly a quarter of its poll workers were 25 and younger, as well as Delaware, Michigan, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., where between 10 and

14 percent of poll workers were 25 and younger in each state.

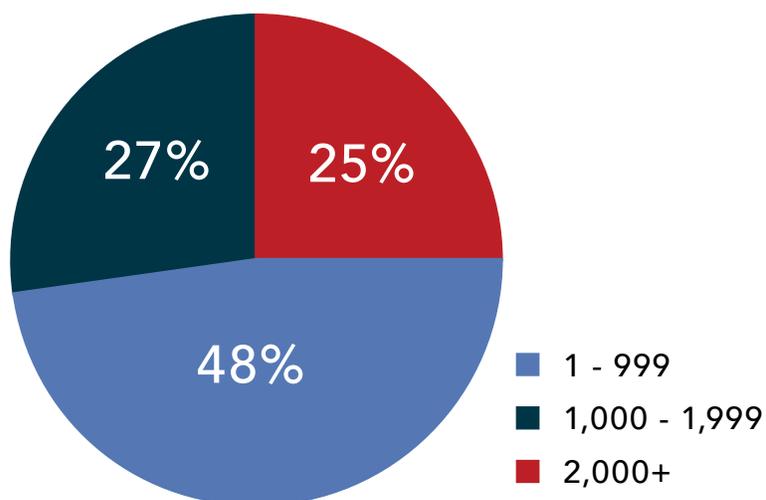
Polling Places

As discussed in the [EAVS Deep Dive on Early, Absentee, and Mail Voting](#), the “where” and “how” of voting in the U.S. is changing considerably. As states and individual election jurisdictions adopt alternatives to in-person voting on Election Day (i.e. early, absentee, and mail voting) and/or shift from traditional precinct-based polling places to “vote centers,”

In 2016, the EAC recognized Hamilton County Board of Elections in Ohio with an Election Clearinghouse Award (a “[Clearie](#)”) for its “[Youth at the Booth](#)” program that recruited high school students to serve at the polls. Hamilton County officials credit these young poll workers as playing an important role in the county’s recent successful transition to electronic poll-books. EAVS data shows that Hamilton County reported having only four poll workers under the age of 18 in 2012, representing one-tenth of one percent of its total. By 2016, the county had increased this figure to 295 such poll workers, representing nearly 12 percent of its total.

The EAC expects to share additional good practices in this area later this year from winners of the 2017 “Clearies” competition that includes a category for recruiting, training, and retaining election workers.

EAVS 2016: Number of Registered Voters per Polling Place*



*excludes CO, OR, and WA (vote-by-mail states).

the concept of the polling place itself is evolving.⁴ EAVS data can help paint a picture of this evolving landscape.

Number and Types of Polling Places

Local election officials operated more than 116,990 polling places during the 2016 elections.⁵ This represents a continued decrease from recent presidential election years, falling from more than 119,968 polling places operated in 2012 and more than 132,237 polling places in 2008. This decrease can likely be explained by the expansion of alternative voting options (e.g. absentee, early, and mail voting), the increased use of these options by voters, and the corresponding decrease in in-person voters on Election Day. The percentage of voters who cast ballots in ways other than in-person on Election Day more than doubled from 2004 to 2016, rising from one in five of all ballots cast to two in five of all ballots cast. The expanded use of “vote centers” in multiple states has also

presumably contributed to the decreasing numbers of polling stations.

Colorado, which enacted large-scale changes to its election processes in 2013, has contributed to this trend. Under Colorado’s new model, all registered voters are mailed ballots for most elections and “vote centers” have replaced traditional polling places. Unsurprisingly, EAVS data shows a considerable decrease in polling locations utilized in Colorado in recent elections, dropping from 1,237 in 2012 to 301 in 2014 and further to 288 in 2016.

Local election officials operated more than 8,616 early voting sites nationwide in 2016. This represented a more than two-fold increase from the 4,184 early voting sites reported in 2012. Jurisdictions reported operating 5,583 early voting sites in 2008.

Registered Voters per Polling Place

EAVS data can also show how voters are generally allocated among polling places. 2016 data demonstrated wide variation among and within the states on this issue. For example, excluding the three states that send all voters a mail ballot (i.e. Colorado, Oregon, and Washington), 25 percent of reporting jurisdictions had an average of more than 2,000 registered voters per polling place, 27 percent had between 1,000 and 2,000, and 48 percent had less than 1,000. The overall average of registered voters per polling station in these jurisdictions was 1,547.⁶

Further demonstrating polling place variation, 44 percent of the 6,060 jurisdictions that responded to this question (outside of Colorado, Oregon, and Washington) reported operating only one

polling place in their jurisdiction.⁷ By contrast, the largest jurisdiction (in terms of registered voters), California's Los Angeles County, reported operating 4,535 polling stations alone.

Looking Ahead

EAVS data from 2016 and previous surveys revealed that poll worker recruitment is an enduring challenge for election officials. As policymakers and election officials work to address this challenge, including by encouraging young people to serve as poll workers, the EAVS will continue to capture data on these issues that can inform election administration efforts.

EAVS data from 2016 has also helped illustrate the changing landscape of polling operations across the country, such as the decreasing number of polling stations used in presidential elections. Future surveys will continue to collect data on this issue and provide a better understanding of this emerging trend.

1 Forty-nine percent of jurisdictions reported level of difficulty data to this EAVS question. The remaining jurisdictions responded that: the question was not applicable (18 percent); or they did not have enough information to answer or the data was not available (33 percent).

2 While this represented a notable increase from 2012 (when 41 percent was reported), the incompleteness of this data has obvious limitations for analysis. The figures presented in this section do not necessarily reflect the entire country's poll worker population nor lend themselves well to comparisons with past election cycles.

3 See the history of the EAC's [Help America Vote College Program](#), as well as its more recent [Election Workers: Successful Practices](#) manual from 2016.

4 The term "vote center" has emerged in recent years to describe centralized polling sites that consolidate multiple traditional precinct-based polling stations and allow voters to cast ballots at any vote center in the jurisdiction. See, for example, [Indiana's description](#) of its vote centers.

5 The vast majority of election jurisdictions reported data on this question, but the actual number of total polling places in 2016 is sure to be higher than this figure, as all jurisdictions in Iowa and a few other places reported no data on this question. Data on this question from 2008 and 2012 was also imprecise, as there were non-reporting jurisdictions these years as well, including the entire states of Tennessee in 2008, and Georgia and Utah in 2012.

6 This figure is the average of reporting jurisdictions' average registered voters per polling place. National-level analysis of registered voters per polling place is complicated by multiple factors, such as divergent practices among and within the states regarding alternative voting options (e.g. absentee, early, and mail voting) and list maintenance, as well as geographic issues (e.g. rural vs. urban). Further research and more localized comparisons (e.g. within individual states or certain types of jurisdictions) where these factors can be mitigated would be useful in better understanding the impact of the number of registered voters per polling place.

7 Wisconsin alone accounted for 63 percent of these jurisdictions with a single polling place, as the state reports EAVS data at a municipal level (whereas most other states do so at the county level).