

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

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## 1. Introduction

In every election an army of temporary poll workers must be recruited and trained to both assist the public in exercising the right to vote and to enforce the rules governing the voting process.<sup>1</sup> These poll workers are geographically dispersed and serve as the front line workers interacting with tens of millions of voters. Principal-agent theory suggests that this is a difficult task for election officials. Because they are self-selected, poll workers may not be the most qualified. Because they are spread across many jurisdictions simultaneously, they have discretion to shirk their duties.<sup>2</sup> Success or failure in these endeavors is widely assumed to be crucial for voter satisfaction and confidence in the integrity of elections, which may in turn influence voter participation and trust in government generally.<sup>3</sup>

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

The Election Assistance Commission and other organizations have offered “best practices” and guidance on poll worker recruitment and training.<sup>4</sup> However, these recommendations are not based on scientific evaluation studies of which practices actually impact voter satisfaction and confidence, or minimize problems at the polls. The recommendations rely on case studies, focus groups, media coverage, and discussions with election administrators and other stakeholders without much vetting of the suggestions.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Between one and two million poll workers are employed in a presidential election (e.g., [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election\\_reform/ERIPBrief19\\_final.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf)). A popular estimate is 1.4 million (e.g., [http://library.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2007\\_06\\_ElectionDay.pdf](http://library.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2007_06_ElectionDay.pdf)). That is roughly the number of active duty military members and translates to approximately one in every hundred voters serves as a poll worker.

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

<sup>3</sup> Thad E. Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2009. “The Human Dimension of Elections: How Poll Workers Shape Public Confidence in Elections.” *Political Research Quarterly* 62:507-22.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.eac.gov/election\\_management\\_resources/poll\\_worker\\_best\\_practices.aspx](http://www.eac.gov/election_management_resources/poll_worker_best_practices.aspx)

interventions, and education reforms. In the absence of such studies, our report focuses mostly on descriptive information about poll worker characteristics, recruitment, and training, and identifies robust correlations among these factors and several important outcomes.

## 2. Basic Facts about Poll Workers

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

It is well established that poll workers are disproportionately female and significantly older than the average member of the public, but perhaps not as old as popular wisdom and anecdotes suggest.<sup>6</sup> The largest groups of poll workers are in their 60s with the second largest category being over 70.<sup>7</sup> A recent survey of poll workers in California found that 44% were retirees.<sup>8</sup> Consistent with this older demographic, a 2006 study of poll workers in Cuyahoga county in Ohio and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional district in Utah found that fewer than half report using the internet or computers on a daily basis.<sup>9</sup> However, the same study indicates that poll workers are more than twice as likely to have a college degree than the general public. Most poll workers are affiliated with one of the two major political parties and have served as poll workers before.<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> David C. Kimball, Brady Baybeck, Cassie Gross, and Laura Wiedlocher. 2010. "Survey of Poll Worker Recruitment, Training, and Evaluation Practices by Local Election Officials." [http://www.umsl.edu/~kimballd/report\\_june112010.pdf](http://www.umsl.edu/~kimballd/report_june112010.pdf).

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

<sup>7</sup> 2008 Election Administration and Voting Survey.

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie E. Glaser, Karin Mac Donald, Iris Hui, and Bruce E. Cain. 2007. "The Front Lines of Democracy: Who Staffs Polling Places and Does It Matter?" Election Administration Center Working Paper 0704, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>9</sup> Thad Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2007. "Poll Workers and the Vitality of Democracy: An Early Assessment." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40:647-54.

<sup>10</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Hall and Moore, 2011.

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

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

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

The correlation of voter evaluations of poll workers and the quality of the voting experience also suggests that effective poll worker training is likely an important determinant of voter satisfaction and confidence. This presumes a causal pathway from training to more competent poll workers, to higher evaluations of poll workers, and then to greater voter satisfaction. However, it may also be the case that voters with more positive attitudes simply rate both poll workers and their voting experience more highly. And while it is in principle possible to tease out the causal relationships, existing studies have not done so. One possibility would be to substitute evaluations of poll workers made by supervisors or third parties in place of subjective voter reports. This has been done in a limited fashion in surveys of local election officials responsible for poll workers. For example, a 2006 Congressional Research Service report found that poll workers “not understanding their jobs” was a problem for 21% of officials and poll workers not reporting for duty a problem in 10% of jurisdictions.<sup>14</sup> A more recent survey of local officials asked for ratings of poll workers on several types of services, finding that they performed better on managing lines and following polling place procedures than handling provisional ballots and registration databases. There was also substantial variation in ratings across jurisdictions.<sup>15</sup>

The most recent and comprehensive study of the determinants of how voters evaluate poll workers is Hall and Stewart’s analysis of the 2012 SPAE.<sup>16</sup> They find that for in-person voting on Election Day, older or African-American poll workers were less likely to be rated as exhibiting “excellent” performance. But there is little support for the hypothesis that descriptive representation is important; that is congruence between the voter’s age or race and the poll worker’s age or race had no significant beneficial impact on the voter’s experience. In contrast, older voters and those who know their poll workers are much more likely to rate them highly. However, these findings must be considered with care. The authors control for problems at the polls, which may confound the identification of other causal relationships. For example, older poll workers may actually cause severe problems for voters, but this analysis would attribute some of the subsequent poor ratings of older poll workers to “problems” rather than the age of the poll worker. Similarly, controlling for whether a voter knows the poll worker may further confound the estimated effect of descriptive representation by age or race. Given the importance of personal interactions between poll workers and voters, the question of whether poll worker attributes such as age and race matter for the quality of the voting experience merits further investigation.

### **4. Recruitment of Poll Workers**

*Is There a Shortage of Poll Workers?*

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

<sup>15</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

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

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

Surveys of local election administrators are one means to investigate whether there is a shortage of poll workers. The EAC provides the most comprehensive nationwide data on the deployment of poll workers via its Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), which is distributed to state officials following each federal election. The EAVS suggests that most jurisdictions report at least some difficulty in finding a sufficient number of poll workers. The problem does not appear to be alleviated in mid-term elections.

Table 1 indicates that about one-third of local officials report that finding poll workers for their jurisdictions was easy or somewhat easy. Only about one in ten found it to be “very difficult.” The largest category – comprising more than one-third of officials, reported that it was “somewhat difficult” to obtain poll workers.

**Table 1. Reported Difficulty of Obtaining Sufficient Poll Workers**

	2008	2010	2012
Very Easy	15%	12%	12%
Somewhat Easy	17%	18%	15%
Neither Difficult Nor Easy	20%	24%	28%
Somewhat Difficult	41%	36%	35%
Very Difficult	7%	11%	11%

*Source:* 2008, 2010, and 2012 EAVS. Oregon and Washington omitted.

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

Table 2 reports the percentages of officials in each state who reported that it was “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult” to obtain sufficient poll workers. The table reveals a surprising amount of variation across the states. Many states report little difficulty across all jurisdictions (DC, Michigan, and New York) while others report difficulty in every local jurisdiction (Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Kentucky, and Louisiana). At least one state reported that it was “very difficult” to find poll workers in every county. Examining the states where difficulty was common does not reveal obvious relationships between this measure and other outcomes such as

<sup>17</sup> The National Commission on Federal Election Reform. “To Assure Pride and Confidence in the Electoral Process.” [http://web1.millercenter.org/commissions/comm\\_2001.pdf](http://web1.millercenter.org/commissions/comm_2001.pdf)

levels of voter turnout, political competitiveness, or waiting times. Below we provide more evidence on this point. The lack of relationship suggests either that the EAVS question is not properly measuring the difficulty of finding poll workers or that the supply of poll workers does not bear much responsibility for general election performance.

**Table 2. “Somewhat Difficult” or “Very Difficult” to Obtain Sufficient Poll Workers**

Alaska	100%
Arizona	40%
Arkansas	40%
California	43%
Colorado	61%
Connecticut	100%
Delaware	100%
District of Columbia	0%
Florida	22%
Hawaii	100%
Idaho	43%
Indiana	63%
Kentucky	100%
Louisiana	100%
Maine	41%
Maryland	42%
Massachusetts	25%
Michigan	0%
Minnesota	7%
Mississippi	34%
Missouri	52%
Montana	70%
Nebraska	55%
Nevada	35%
New Mexico	29%
North Carolina	59%
Ohio	48%
Rhode Island	49%
South Dakota	41%
Tennessee	59%
Texas	29%
Vermont	16%
West Virginia	43%
Wisconsin	39%
Wyoming	83%

*Source:* 2012 EAVS. Oregon and Washington omitted.

To further examine the potential causes of poll worker recruitment success, Table 3 reports several metrics by the reported difficulty of obtaining poll workers in local jurisdictions.<sup>18</sup> The precise cause and effect of this relationship deserves more study, but these data suggest reasons why it might be more difficult to find poll workers in some locations. In line with a recent study showing that election officials in urban locations routinely report more difficulty in recruiting,<sup>19</sup> we find that that difficult was greater in jurisdictions with more registered voters. This made the ratio of registered voters to poll workers slightly higher in places where poll workers were more difficult to obtain. The table also shows that a larger share of votes was cast on election day (rather than in advance) only in jurisdictions where poll workers were most difficult to find. Those communities also had somewhat younger poll workers.

**Table 2. Other Factors and the Difficulty of Obtaining Poll Workers in the 2012 Elections**

	Median Number of <i>Registered Voters</i>	Median Number of <i>Registered Voters Per Poll Worker</i>	Median Percentage of <i>Votes Cast on Election Day</i>	Median Percentage of <i>Poll Workers over Age 70</i>
Very Easy	3,185	139	78%	25%
Somewhat Easy	7,528	149	75%	22%
Neither Difficult Nor Easy	12,434	170	76%	23%
Somewhat Difficult	10,427	171	75%	29%
Very Difficult	12,681	174	86%	19%

*Source:* 2012 EAVS. Oregon and Washington omitted.

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

#### *Does the Number of Poll Workers Matter?*

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

The EAVS asks local officials to report the number of poll workers assigned to each polling place. For ease of exposition, we aggregate these figures to the state level. Figure 1 shows

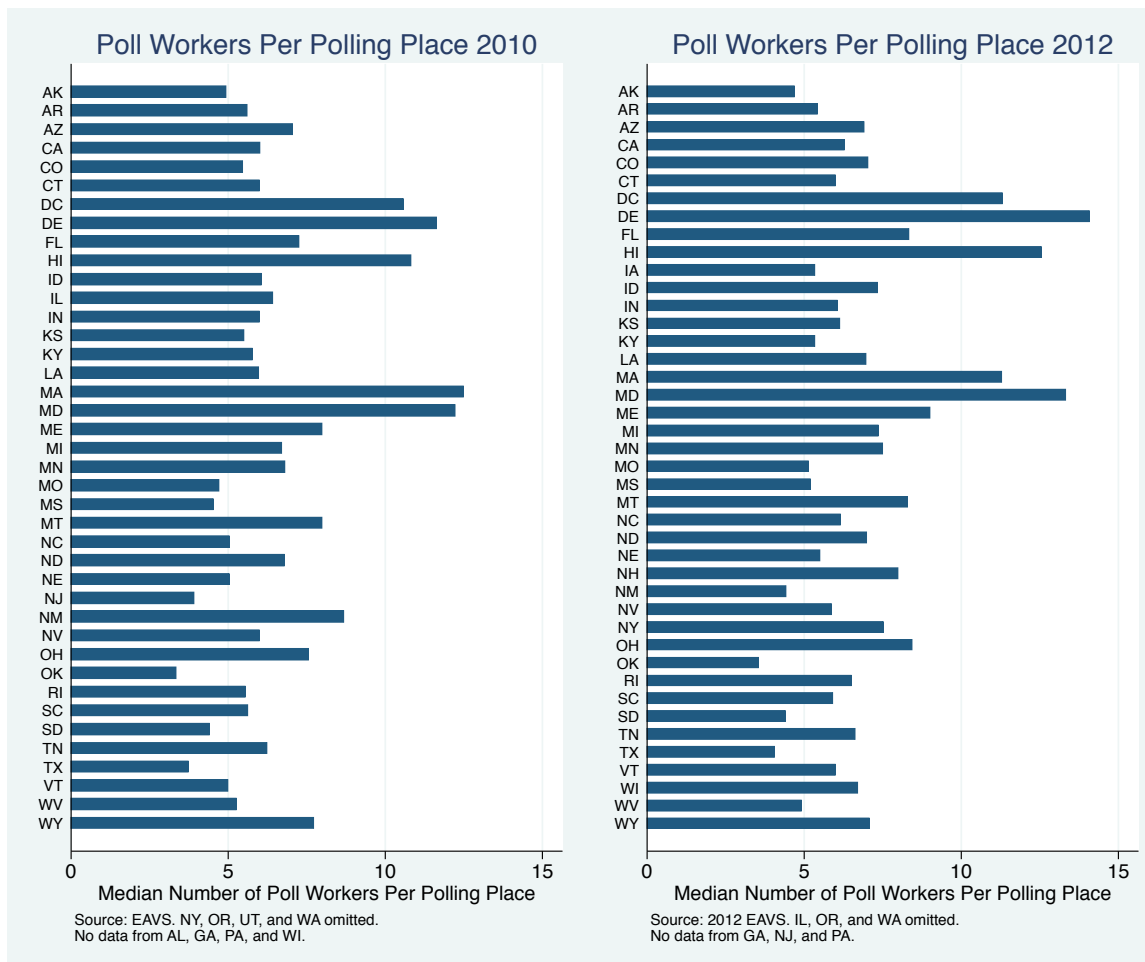
<sup>18</sup> We compute medians rather than means to minimize that influence of extreme values that might be unrepresentative or erroneous.

<sup>19</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

median number of poll workers per polling place.<sup>20</sup> The figure shows that the typical state deployment translates to between five and ten poll workers at each location, but with substantial variation. States such as Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts have double or triple the number of poll workers per polling place found in states such as Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. Moving down from the state to the local level, the median ratio nationwide in 2012 was 6.3 poll workers per polling place.

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

**Figure 1. Number of Poll Workers Per Polling Place in the 2010 and 2012 Elections**

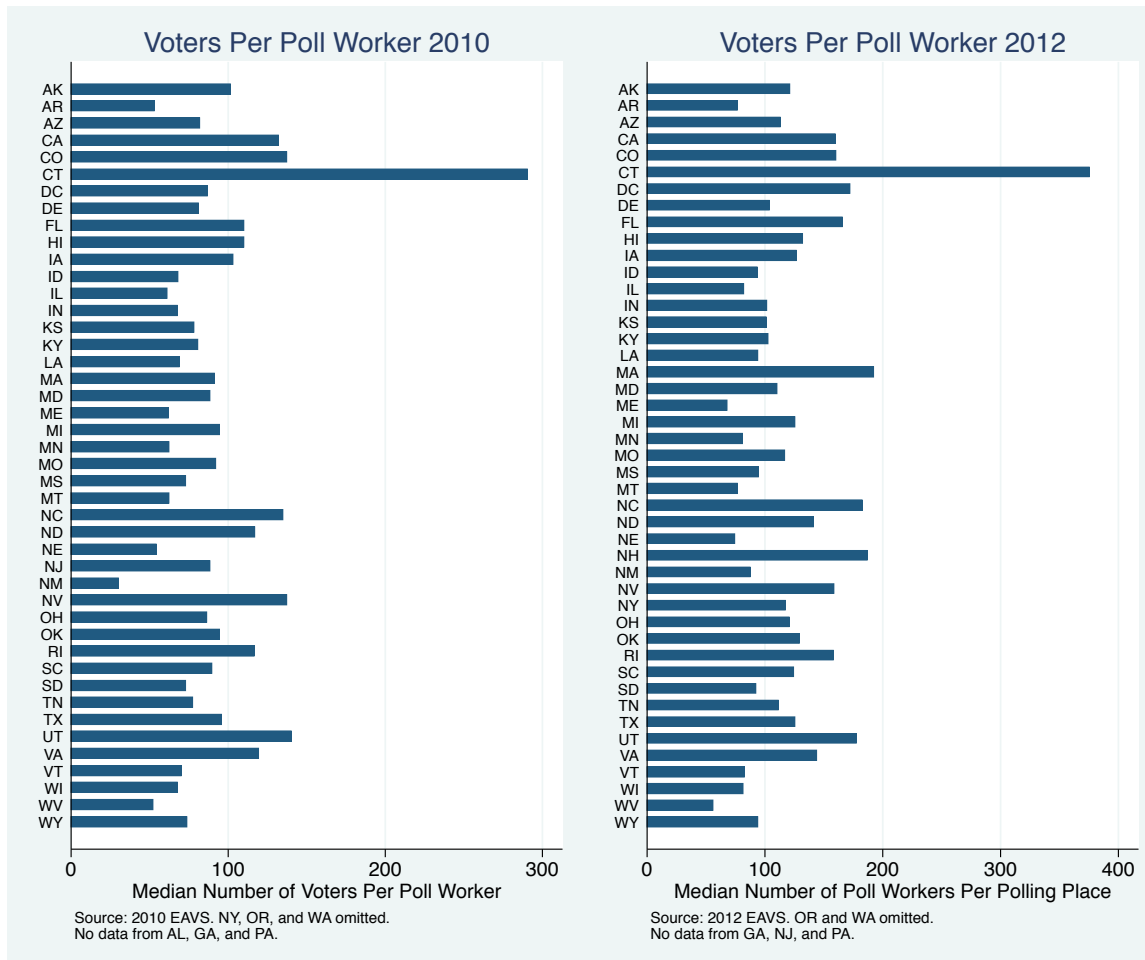


<sup>20</sup> Using either the total number of polling places or only the number of election day voting locations does not alter the substantive conclusions. The two measures are almost perfectly correlated.



Some of the variation in poll workers per polling place is due to differing numbers of voters served. We would naturally expect more poll workers in polling places that have larger numbers of voters participating. Figure 2 reports the ratio of poll workers to voters in the 2010 and 2012 elections. In contrast to the number of poll workers per polling place, this graph shows that states are strikingly uniform (aside from Connecticut). Despite substantial differences in voter volume, geography, polling place environments, budgets, and other aspects of election administration, most states deploy about one poll worker for every 100 voters.<sup>21</sup> There is some variation around this central tendency, with states such as Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, and West Virginia reporting closer to 75 voters per poll worker and California, Colorado, Nevada, and North Carolina closer to 150 voters per poll worker. We should consider whether these differences have consequences for the voter experience. Based on casual knowledge, the states with higher ratios (again, aside from Connecticut) appear to be the same ones that make heavy use of early or absentee voting, and that might allow them to deploy fewer election day poll workers. We provide more systematic evidence on this point below.

**Figure 2. Number of Voters Per Poll Worker in the 2010 and 2012 Elections**



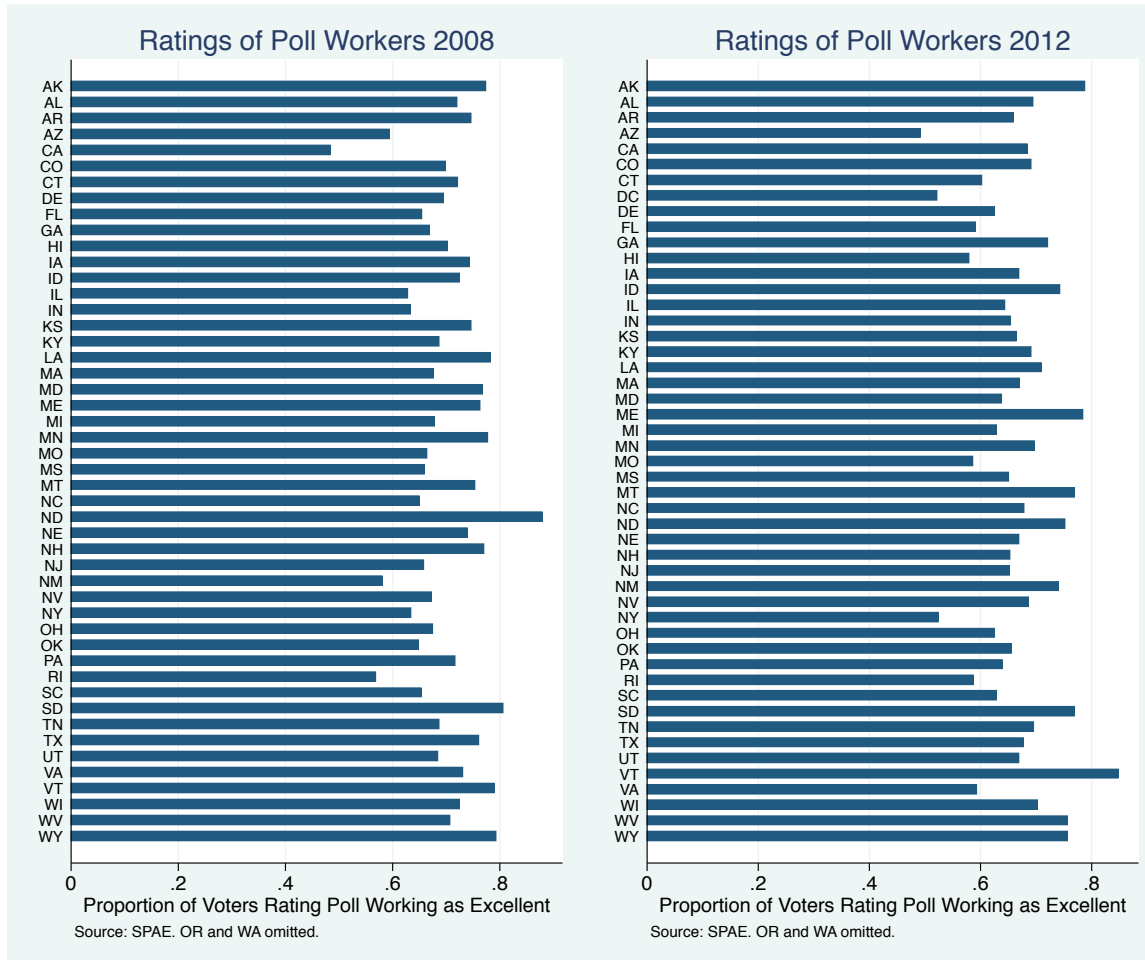
<sup>21</sup> Computing this measure based only on election day voters rather than including early and absentee voters does not alter the substantive conclusions significance. The two measures are correlated at approximately .91.

One metric that could be influenced by the deployment of poll workers is the level of satisfaction that voters express about the poll workers who serve them. Although this measure could well reflect factors beyond the immediate control of poll workers (see first sections of this report), as a general evaluation the responses to a question about poll worker performance provides a general metric for comparisons across states from the SPAE.<sup>22</sup> Before examining variation across states, we note that the overwhelming majority of respondents are pleased with poll worker job performance. For example, in the 2012 survey two-thirds gave a rating of “excellent,” another quarter of respondents chose “good,” with only five percent selecting “fair” and less than one percent selecting “poor.” Yet even with this high level of support, there is notable variation across the states. Figure 3 reports the percentage of voters who rate their poll workers’ performances as “excellent.” While the average is around 70%, some states reach above 80% and others are below 60%. In general it appears that less populous, more rural states such as Alaska, Maine, North Dakota, and Vermont show higher levels of satisfaction while more populous, more urban states such as California, Maryland, New York, and Rhode Island show lower levels. Exceptions such as Arizona, Florida, and Texas suggest that other factors are at work beyond the simple distribution of the population. Below we explore these further.

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

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



We now consider relationships among several measures. These can be divided into “inputs” such as the number of poll workers and use of in-person and early voting affects and well as “outputs” such as voter wait times, confidence that their voters were counted as intended, voter ratings of poll workers, and voter judgements about how well run polling places were. Figure 4 presents evidence of these relationships using scatter plots of 2008 data. Correlations are listed where they are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Remarkably, the difficult of obtaining poll workers, the number of poll workers per polling place and the number of voters per poll worker are unrelated to any outcomes. Ratings of poll workers as “excellent” are positively correlated with voter perceptions of how well the polling places were run and their confidence that their votes would be counted appropriately. Confidence increases when there is more in-person voting and less early voting. A well-run polling place is also positively related to confidence and negatively related to waiting times. It appears that more important that the sheer number of poll workers is their performance and the degree of traditional polling place voting. We note that while the precise causal paths among these variables are unclear – for example, do polling places run well because of good poll workers or do poll workers function better when a polling place is better

managed, the relationships identified in Figure 4 tend to hold up even in multiple regression models that control for many factors simultaneously.

There is at best a modest relationship between the two measures examined earlier – poll workers per polling place and voters per poll worker – and general election administration performance, as measured by the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Election Performance Index (EPI). The EPI is a composite measure of election system performance using 17 indicators in the 2008 election.<sup>23</sup> The EPI is not significantly correlated with voters per poll worker ( $r = .05, p = .39$ ) but is positively related to the number of poll workers per polling place ( $r = .22, p = .09$ ). Although more complete data from the 2012 election might reveal more robust relationships,<sup>24</sup> there is only weak support for a connection between the number of poll workers deployed and effective conduct of elections.

The lack of a relationship between “input” variables and wait times might be surprising. It does not necessarily mean that poll workers have no impact on how long it takes to process voters; anecdotal information about egregious problems in recent election suggest just the opposite. But it does suggest that poll workers are not the primary or systematic culprits. Consider a survey conducted by the Election Center that asked local election officials for their professional opinions about what caused long wait times.<sup>25</sup> Fifty-eight percent named the length of the ballot, 20% blamed a shortage of ballots or equipment, and 18% identified a shortage of poll workers.

One “input” not included in the scatterplot is how these measures relate to who is responsible for poll worker training. We coded whether poll worker training is conducted primarily by a state official or is mainly a local responsibility.<sup>26</sup> Those indicators were largely unrelated to any outcomes in Figure 4. It appears that the quality of training depends on more than simply who does it. We will return to the issue of training below.

This points to the limitations of using state-based measures. Extreme problems such as hours-long waits at polling places are usually localized. These kinds of outliers cannot be detected by indicators collected at the state level.<sup>27</sup> Some voters have discouraging experiences and some poll workers botch their tasks. Our data identify broad conditions that could well set the stage for local disasters. Getting the right number of poll workers is important for the efficient and effective function of a polling place. The addition or subtraction of just a couple of front line workers in a government office or retail business may affect the success of those operations. The consequences of the observed variation in poll worker deployment deserve much more study. Future research should endeavor to identify the causal impact of poll workers on problems at the polls and other evaluations of the voting experience. Only then will policy makers have sufficient information to determine whether there is a shortage of poll workers.

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<sup>23</sup> See <http://pewstates.org/epi> for more background and data.

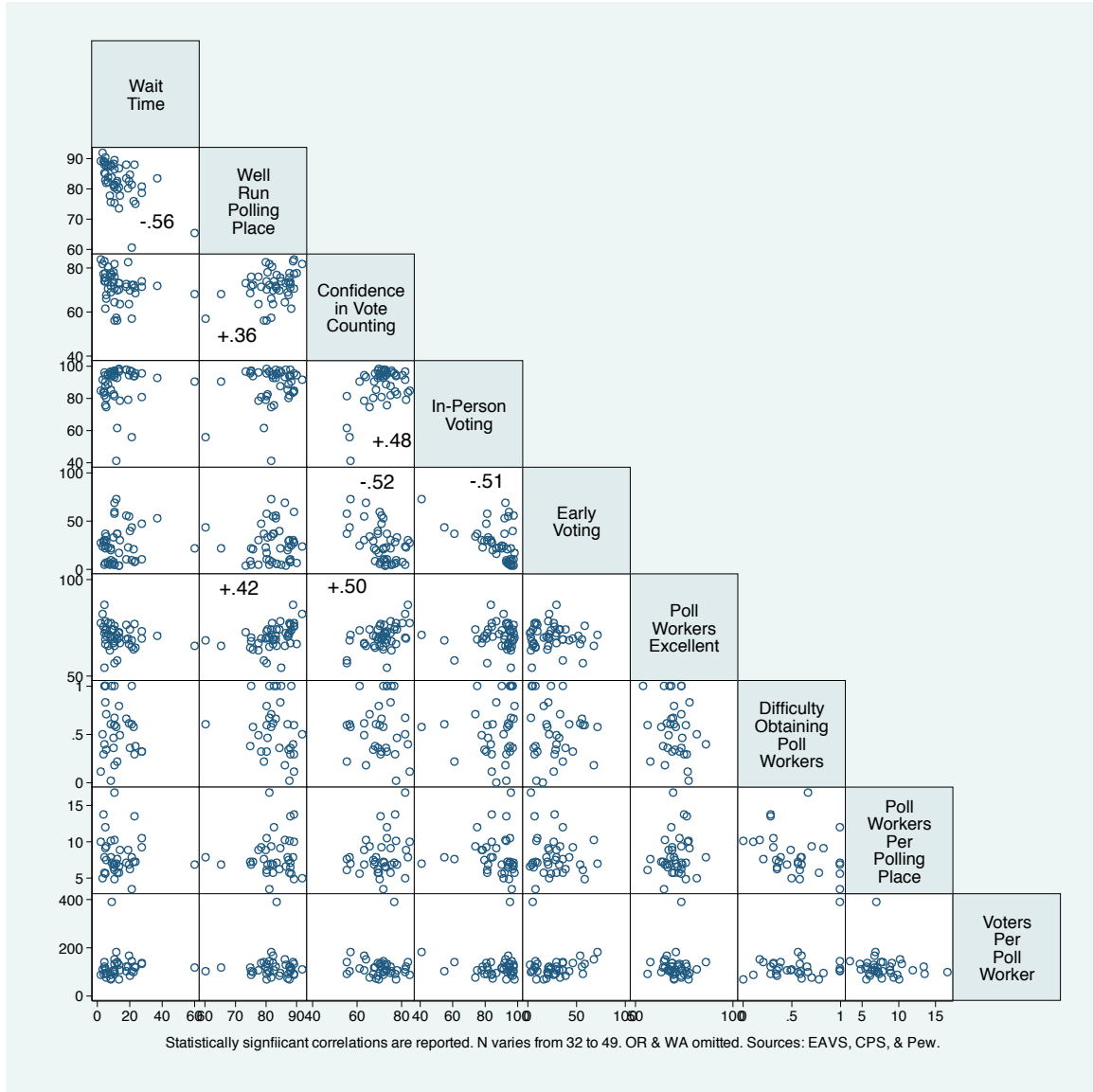
<sup>24</sup> Due to missing data, the 2008 correlations are based on only 38 states (poll workers per polling place) and 40 states (voters per poll worker).

<sup>25</sup> Election Center. “Election 2012 – Long Lines.” PowerPoint presentation at the January 2013 meeting of the Joint Election Officials Liaison Committee. ([www.electioncenter.org/JOELC/.../Election2012-LongLines.ppt](http://www.electioncenter.org/JOELC/.../Election2012-LongLines.ppt))

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election\\_reform/ERIPBrief19\\_final.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Although measures from EAVS can analyzed at the local level, data from the CPS and SPAE surveys generally cannot due to the small number of respondents in each jurisdiction.

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



*Do Methods of Recruitment Matter?*

Although there is some variation in how much poll workers are paid,<sup>28</sup> poll workers generally receive low pay for long hours.<sup>29</sup> Given the modest compensation offered in most jurisdictions, it is tempting to infer that poll worker pay should be increased. However, most studies of the

<sup>28</sup> “Helping Americans Vote: Poll Workers.” 2007.

[http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election\\_reform/ERIPBrief19\\_final.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Karin Mac Donald and Bonnie E. Glaser. 2007. “The Attraction of Working from 6AM to 9:30PM for a Fraction of Minimum Wage: Poll Workers and Their Motivation to Serve.” Presented at the Annual Meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL April 12-15, 2007.

motivation of poll workers find that pay is a minor factor,<sup>30</sup> so there is reason to doubt that the supply of poll workers will be highly responsive to marginally more money. Another reason for caution is that an increase in payments to poll workers will result in additional workers who are motivated more by monetary reward than civic duty. It is possible that such workers will require more training and supervision, or may even cause more problems at the polls. This is an area ripe for more systematic analysis, so we offer this concern only as a caveat.

Most state laws require that poll workers are selected by the two major political parties, or at least that local officials must at least give priority to hiring those poll workers who are recommended by the parties. Surveys of officials show that parties are the most common sources for recruiting poll workers, ahead of government employees, students, and local businesses.<sup>31</sup> In Pennsylvania party-sponsored poll workers are even popularly elected in municipal elections. Although some states allow unaffiliated voters to serve as poll workers, no state law explicitly prefers non-partisan individuals.<sup>32</sup>

Based on the evidence to date, we conjecture that the party-based selection process appears to be a doubled-edged sword. On the positive side, having representatives from both parties working at the polls helps prevent any bias in administration by ensuring that each side is monitoring the other. Because the parties are motivated to have representatives at the polls, they are likely to provide election officials with sufficient numbers of workers, thus mitigating the difficulty of finding enough poll workers. (In some places this is not true; one party generates many more workers than the other, so balance is a concern.<sup>33</sup>) Party-sponsored poll workers are also more likely to be experienced, having served as poll workers in previous elections.

At the same time, we might hypothesize that loyal party activists are not necessarily the most objective or competent poll workers available. This shortcoming may be due to principal-agent problems that include party-based selection, insufficient screening mechanisms that only sometimes involve interviews or questionnaires,<sup>34</sup> and incomplete training to ensure uniform administration. A non-partisan selection system focused on skill rather than political connections might well produce a better crop of front line workers. Our review suggests that the *quantity* of poll workers is a modest concern for many jurisdictions but the *quality* of those poll workers might be a more important consideration.

## 5. Training of Poll Workers

There is a broad consensus among scholars that training is important for the ability of poll workers to perform effectively. Nearly every state requires some form of training, although a few do not.<sup>35</sup> Local election officials, especially those in large jurisdictions, rate training as their

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<sup>30</sup> Glaser et al. 2007. Elizabeth W. McAuliffe. 2009. "The Unexamined Element of Election Administration: Why Citizens Choose to Serve at Poll Workers on Election Day." Ph.D. dissertation. Florida State University.

<sup>31</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2007. *Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC.

<sup>33</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2007. *Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC.

highest priority, higher than recruitment, evaluation, and compensation.<sup>36</sup> However, there are a wide variety of training schema and no direct tests among them to determine what works best. This is an area that deserves much more attention and analysis.

Current training practices do not appear to translate into uniform administration. To take one contentious area of election administration as an example, several studies have shown that requests for voter identification are highly uneven. Surveys of voters suggest that ID is requested of voters in states that do not require it and not requested of voters in states where it is mandated.<sup>37</sup> In 2008 a quarter of photos in states where any form of ID is acceptable were nonetheless asked to show photo ID.<sup>38</sup> Further, voters from some demographic categories report receiving more scrutiny from poll workers.<sup>39</sup> While acknowledging that self-reports contain some error due to faulty memories or social desirability, the data indicate that laws are not applied in a uniform manner.

A study of California polling places suggests that fewer votes are lost (i.e., the residual vote rate is lower) when poll workers are given reference material to take home training and rate the training as higher quality. Importantly, experienced poll workers also produce lower residual vote rates.<sup>40</sup>

We know some things about training based on surveys of local election officials. As of 2006, the average training was 3.5 hours, but much longer in some jurisdictions and less than one hour in 10% of jurisdictions. Poll workers are almost uniformly trained on topics including how to assist disabled voters, follow election laws, secure ballots, operate equipment, and verify voter identification. Training is less even on subjects such as how to administer provisional ballots and resolve conflicts with voters.<sup>41</sup> Surprisingly, in small jurisdictions only a third of poll workers are training on provisional ballots and just over half are on the operation of voting equipment.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the general agreement that training is vital, there is some evidence that training may not be done in the most effective manner. Poll workers in Ohio and Utah frequently reported that did not spend enough time practicing on the equipment, found the sessions difficult to understand, and generally felt ill prepared when their Election Day experiences differed significantly from the training.<sup>43</sup> For example, in some jurisdictions, a majority of poll workers receive at most one training session, but workers that attend multiple training sessions actually

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<sup>36</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Stewart III. 2013. "A Voter's Eye View of the 2012 Election."

<sup>38</sup> R. Michael Alvarez et al. 2009. "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections: Final Report."

<sup>39</sup> Rachel V. Cobb, James D. Greiner, and Kevin M. Quinn. 2012. "Can Voter ID Laws Be Administered in a Race-Neutral Manner? Evidence from the City of Boston in 2008." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7:1-33. Lonna Rae Atkeson et al. 2010. "A New Barrier to Participation: Heterogeneous Application of Voter Identification Laws." *Electoral Studies* 29:66-73.

<sup>40</sup> Bonnie E. Glaser et al. 2007. "Explaining Voting System Performance: Do Technology, Training, and Poll Worker Characteristics Matter?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

<sup>41</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Thad Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2007 "Poll Workers and the Vitality of Democracy: An Early Assessment." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40:647-54.

report more problems on the job.<sup>44</sup> Of course, it may be the case that the most conscientious poll workers are the ones that both attend multiple training sessions and take note of and report problems. Once again, this demonstrates the need for objective or third party performance indicators for evaluating poll worker performance and the efficacy of different training methods. However, evaluation of poll worker performance is a low ranked priority for election officials.<sup>45</sup> The most common forms of evaluation of poll workers are in the form of feedback from voters or poll workers themselves, although larger jurisdictions also utilize measures of polling place performance of evaluations from supervisors.<sup>46</sup> However, these existing evaluation measures have not been exploited to formally test training methods or recruitment strategies. Again this is an area in need of additional research.

## 6. Recommendations

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

In some contrast to the prevailing wisdom in the election administration community, we propose thinking about poll worker recruitment in slightly different ways. In particular, evidence suggests that poll worker *quality* – meaning both selection and training – is at least as pressing an issue as poll worker *quantity*. Quantity is more salient because it is easier to assess and is governed by statutes that mandate minimum values. Quality is more difficult to evaluate and is frequently not assessed because statutes seldom require it.

Poll workers are largely self-selected and face limited screening aside what the major political parties use in creating lists for local officials. Indeed, the main criteria for selection might be that a person is available and loyal to a party. Training is scant in some jurisdictions and does not translate into uniform administration of procedures at the polls. Poll worker evaluations are even rarer. Obtaining sufficient poll workers will continue to be a significant problem for a small number of jurisdictions, but finding (or producing through training) highly competent poll workers appears to be a problem facing a larger number of localities.

Alternatives to selection by the two major political parties should be considered. These could build on options that have already been selectively used in some places. Nebraska permits counties to draft poll workers in a manner akin to jury duty.<sup>47</sup> It has used in Douglas County, where the poll worker ranks are a combination of draftees and volunteers.<sup>48</sup> Other areas of election administration have relied on citizen-driven models that rely on a combination of random

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<sup>44</sup> Hall, Monson, and Patterson. 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Kimball et al. 2010.

<sup>47</sup><http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Successful%20Practices%20for%20Poll%20Worker%20Recruitment%20Section%201%20Recruitment.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.votedouglascounty.com/faqs.aspx#poll>



selection from a pool of self-selection nominees. Arizona and California now staff statewide redistricting commissions in this way. Another model is that used in 2012 by the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board when it hired staff to review petitions to hold a statewide recall election. Applicants applied for positions, but anyone donating to a campaign in the previous year was prohibited from being hired. However, there have been no evaluation studies of whether different methods of recruiting poll workers have any impact on the quality of the voting experience. And while random selection avoid potential biases in who signs up to be a poll worker, it has the liability of not making best use of experienced or motivated poll workers who would otherwise volunteer repeatedly. It would also probably be quite unpopular with the public.

Our review has identified a number of important open questions regarding the recruitment and training of poll workers. We do not yet know precisely what makes for a successful poll worker, although the evidence we have presented suggests that raw numbers deployed are not as important as previously thought. More research is needed to determine which “inputs” most strongly relate to “outputs” of concern. We suggest that grants-in-aid to localities for election administration be leveraged to encourage localities to cooperate in the systematic evaluation of different practices. To guide this work, our review indicates that disproportionate emphasis has been placed on the number of poll workers rather than on selection and training on the most competent workers who provide high levels of service and uniform administration. Additional compensation might assist with poll worker recruitment, but the evidence suggests that other motivations are more important. Selection by parties helps to ensure partisan balance and sufficient numbers of poll workers, but it does not necessarily maximize quality or competence. The challenge for election administrators is to balance the benefits and concerns of a party-driven self-selection process, and then to provide high quality training to prepare all poll workers for the realities of election day.