

Poll workers rely on their own attitudes and beliefs to determine how to apply voter ID laws.

There has been much debate recently over the role of voter identification (ID) laws in affecting election turnout, particularly among minority groups. While much of the discussion has focused on the laws themselves, in new research, [Lonna Rae Atkeson](#), [Yann P. Kerevel](#), [R. Michael Alvarez](#), and [Thad E. Hall](#) examine the role that poll workers play in applying these laws. Through a survey of poll workers, they find that whether or not they support voter photo identification influences if they ask for photo identification correctly. They also find that while more highly educated poll workers are less likely to ask for photo identification, better training does not overcome the desire among less educated poll workers to implement voter ID laws in the way that they desire.

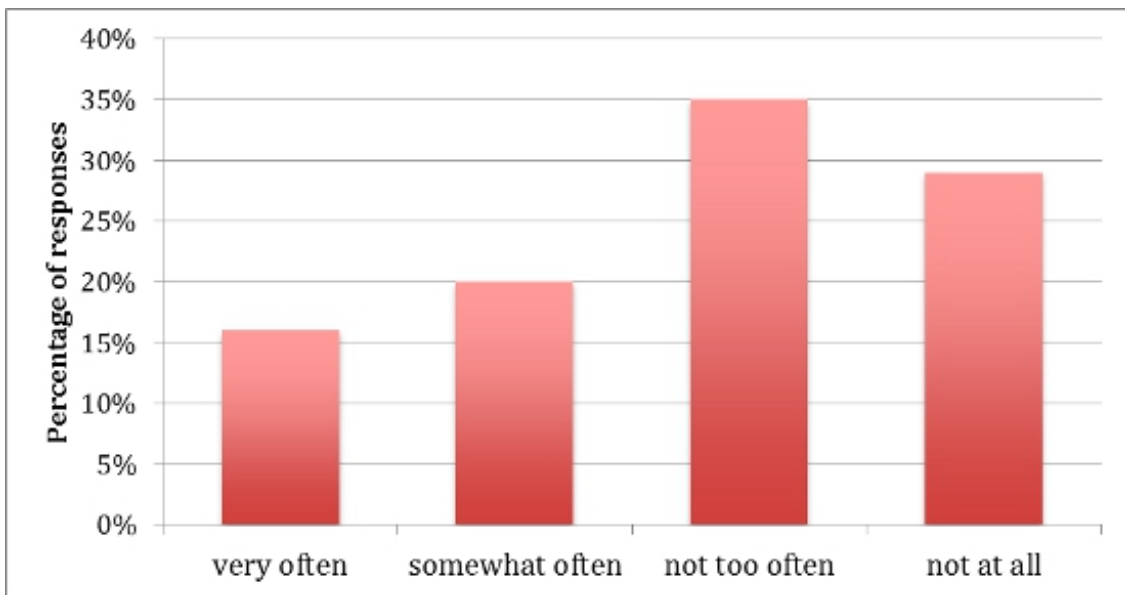
In the United States, much of the recent public debate over voter identification (ID) laws have focused on whether stricter ID laws reduce turnout, especially among minority groups, and reduce election fraud, real or imagined.

Unfortunately, the debate over the passage of strict photo identification laws in a number of states has largely ignored how different groups are impacted by other voter identification laws that do not require photo identification. Previous studies have [found](#) that even when photo identification is not required, poll workers often ask voters to show a photo id before allowing them to vote. Especially disconcerting is that racial and ethnic minority groups are [more likely](#) than whites to report being asked to [show a photo identification](#) even when the law does not require them to do so. This begs the question: why do poll workers inconsistently apply voter identification laws?

We surveyed poll workers in New Mexico in 2008 and asked them: “When a voter approached without any form of identification, how often did you ask voters to show a form of photo identification?” New Mexico has a complicated voter identification law that allows voters to choose the way in which they identify themselves to poll workers. The minimum identification required in 2008 was for each voter to state her name, registration address, and birth year (some first time voters do have to show photo identification as required under the [Help America Vote Act](#) (HAVA)). Voters could also choose to show a physical form of identification.

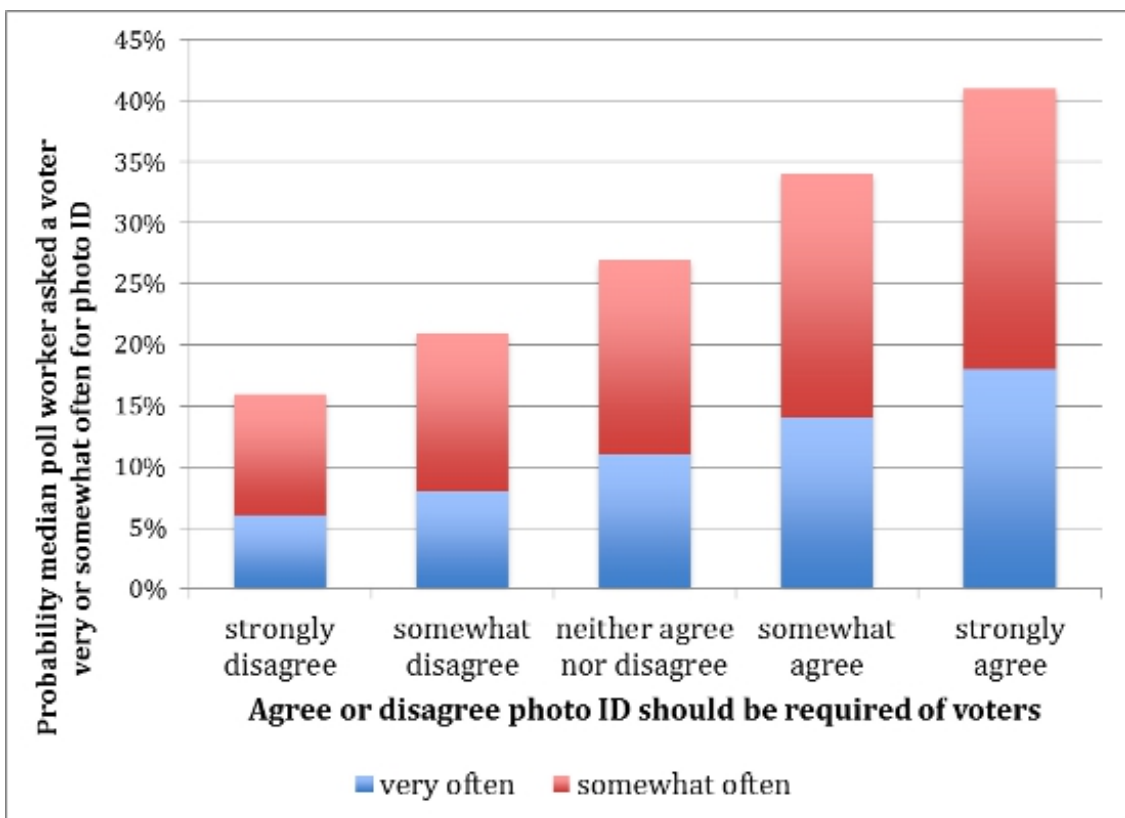
Asking for photo identification is the most restrictive form of identification a poll worker can ask from a voter, and is contrary to the law. Although a majority of poll workers do not ask for photo identification somewhat or very often, 36 percent of poll workers indicate they asked voters for photo identification on a regular basis (see Figure 1). The frequency of responses suggests that poll workers engage in discretion and that poll workers vary in the type of identification they require from voters.

Figure 1 – How often did you ask voters to show a form of photo identification? New Mexico poll workers, 2008 post-election survey



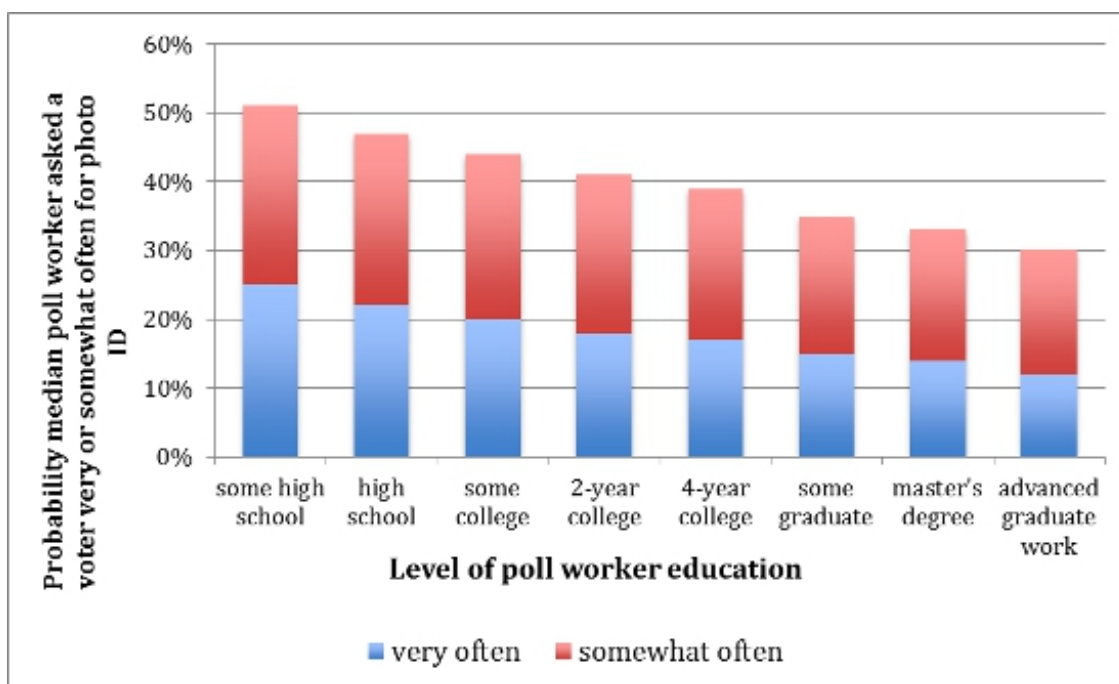
Why do poll workers inconsistently apply voter identification laws? It turns out that the demographics of a poll worker – their race, partisanship, amount of training or length of time as a poll worker – does not affect the likelihood that poll workers will ask for a photo ID. Instead, we find that an individual poll worker’s attitudes about photo identification and her level of education explain variation in the application of voter identification law. We see in Figure 2 that, as poll worker support for requiring photo identification increases, so does the probability they will ask for photo identification somewhat or very often.

Figure 2 – The impact of attitudes about photo ID on asking for photo ID



It is important to note that poll workers with higher levels of education are less likely to ask for photo identification somewhat or very often (see Figure 3). This suggests that better educated poll workers can balance their attitudes about photo identification and recognize that applying their attitudes independently is not appropriate. Having a better educated class of workers can help ensure that election procedures are implemented correctly, and not based on the poll worker’s normative judgments. Importantly, we found that poll worker training does not overcome this desire among less well educated poll workers to implement the voter ID law as they think is best.

Figure 3 – The impact of education on asking for photo ID



When poll workers are given substantial discretion to implement voter identification requirements, they tend to rely on their own attitudes and beliefs rather than follow the law as explained in their training. In New Mexico, some poll workers ignore the law and instead rely on their feelings and attitudes about the way voter identification should be administered. A voter identification law that substantially reduces the amount of discretion available to poll workers may reduce the influence of individual attitudes. During early voting in Bernalillo County, when voters approached the polling place, they were asked to fill out a card with their name, address, and birth year. Poll workers used this card to look up the voter to ensure they received the proper ballot and gave them less discretion in asking voters for ID. Similarly formulated processes may reduce poll worker discretion in this process.

When we [observed the 2009 Albuquerque, New Mexico, city elections](#), where photo identification was required of voters for the first time, we found that poll workers consistently asked for photo identification as required by law. There was little of the variation that was observed in the 2008 federal elections. Quite simply, it is easier to implement voter identification procedures that are easy to follow from the poll worker's point of view, and are clearly communicated to voters when they enter the polling place.

It is important to remember that changing a state's photo identification laws does not address the underlying problem: some poll workers, especially those who are less well educated, will implement certain policies based on their own biases, not based on the law. Studying these biases, [through surveys and in-person observation](#), can improve how elections are implemented and the quality of service that voters receive on Election Day.

This article is based on the paper, 'Who Asks For Voter Identification? Explaining Poll-Worker Discretion', in The Journal of Politics.

Featured [image credit: Alex Thompson \(Flickr, CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0\)](#)

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