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Fortifying Election Security Through Poll Worker Policy

The smooth functioning of elections relies on hundreds of thousands of part-time workers across the United States to support the voting and counting process. [Poll workers](#) and other temporary election workers support all aspects of the voting process. They are responsible for setting up voting equipment, checking in voters, and assisting in the counting of ballots. To ensure the smooth functioning of an election, workers must conduct their job with integrity and discipline. Their role, and the public's trust in their role, is a cornerstone of the democratic process.

Concerns are mounting that temporary election workers recruited and trained by organizations with nefarious intent may undermine election security and public trust. In [a statement](#) released in early October 2022, the Bipartisan Policy Center's Task Force on Elections condemned "any effort designed with the intent of using temporary election workers to undermine the credibility of the election ecosystem."

The COVID-19 pandemic made recruitment of election workers more difficult and highlighted the importance of temporary election workers. Since then, there have been several isolated incidents in which temporary election workers attempted to undermine election administration in pursuit of partisan goals. Before Michigan's August primary, some poll workers were instructed to unplug voting equipment in the name of exposing fraud. On September 29, 2022 a Michigan poll worker was [charged](#) with falsifying records and tampering with voting equipment during the primary.

To restore and maintain trust in the election system, the public must have faith that poll workers will uphold their duties and defend the election infrastructure that allows U.S. democracy to function. This explainer surveys the state of temporary election-worker policies across all 50 states, highlighting both the litany of protections in place and the gaps that remain.

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October 2022

Background

Temporary election workers, or poll workers, have different names in each state: Some refer to them as election judges, precinct workers, board workers, election clerks, inspectors, or commissioners. Election offices ramp up the recruitment of temporary workers around the election to support early voting, Election Day management, and ballot counting.

Common responsibilities include setting up voting equipment, verifying voters' identities, distributing ballots, preparing provisional ballots for voters whose names do not appear on the list, helping elderly and disabled citizens vote, updating voter registration information, and maintaining safe and orderly polling places. Temporary election workers also staff early-voting sites and support the counting of ballots after the election. They might help with post-election audits or support recounts when necessary.

In 2017, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) designated election infrastructure as critical infrastructure. Subsequently, election offices have implemented cybersecurity and physical security protections. CISA identified the [risk of "insider threats,"](#) meaning the potential risk to the system from the human component. To mitigate this threat, election offices must shore up the security and integrity of temporary election worker policies and, in turn, ensure their security and protection from threats.

The process of recruiting, training, and managing election workers varies by state. In some places, local political party chapters nominate lists of election workers to the municipal election office. In other states, constituents can apply directly to their local election office to be election workers. Training requirements also vary by state – some state election offices prepare and conduct training at the state level, while others do it at the county level. Terms of employment and management practices are usually implemented at the municipal level, but some are subject to state or county guidelines.

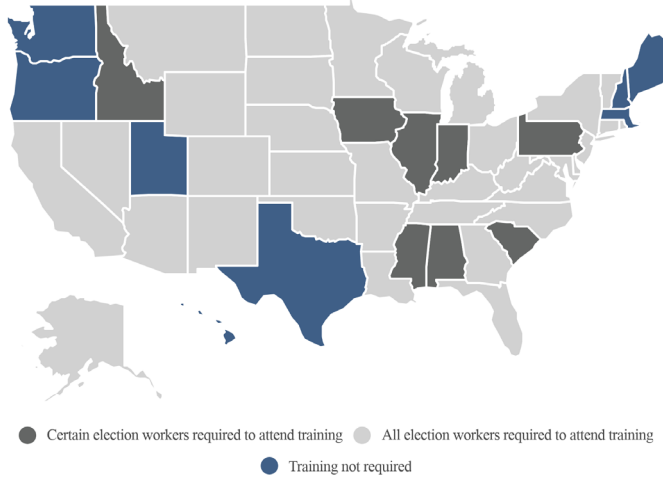
State and local election offices require additional security measures for temporary workers who take part in the ballot counting process. Election workers who handle ballots follow strict chain of custody requirements that often require two people to be always in the same room as the ballots. Additionally, most election offices require that representatives from both major political parties are represented as election workers to ensure bipartisan transparency into the election process.

Election workers need sufficient training, detailed instruction, and [continual vetting](#) to perform each part of the election process. States that lack specificity in their training, instruction, and recruitment of election workers risk hiring election workers who cannot perform their job properly, who lack the public's trust, or who abuse the process for partisan gain.

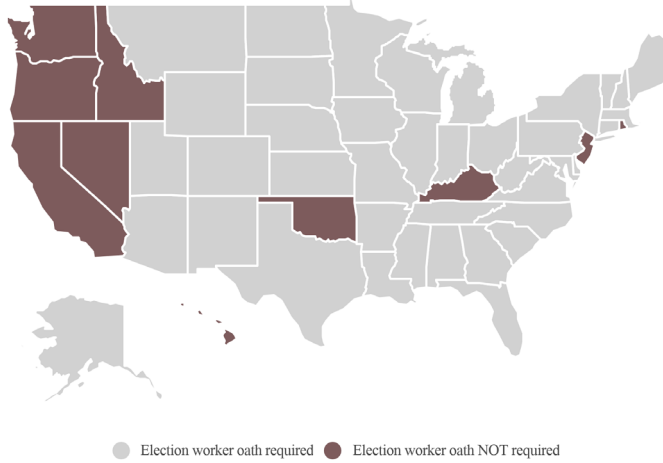
While many states and localities do an excellent job of articulating and enforcing governing rules poll worker training, codes of conduct, partisan parity and poll worker protection, gaps and discrepancies remain. To close the gaps in poll worker policy, state legislatures should consider codifying bipartisan or multi-partisan involvement in the election process, universalizing codes of conduct that affirm professionalism and ethics, requiring thorough training and preparation, articulating clear uniform dismissal policies, and increasing legal protections for temporary election workers in the 2023 legislative session.

The State of State Election Worker Policy

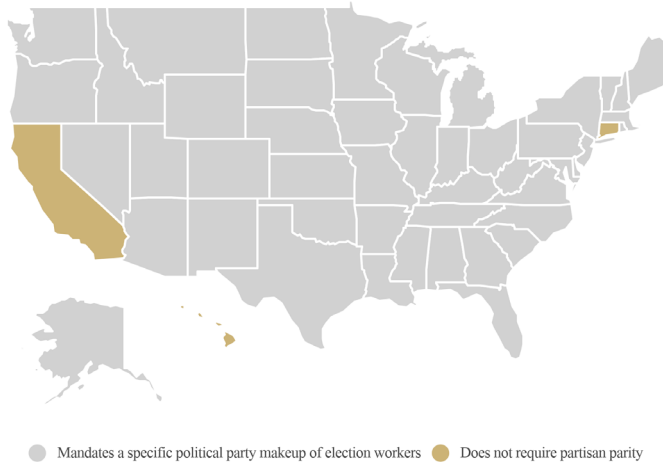
42 states + DC require election worker training in state law



40 states + DC require temporary election workers to take oaths of office



47 states strive for partisan parity when hiring election workers



TEMPORARY ELECTION WORKER TRAINING

What the Data Show

- **42 states and the District of Columbia require training for temporary election workers.**
- **Eight states do not require training at the state level, but many encourage it at the local level.**

Why Training Matters

The mosaic of training policies across states is a security concern. Discrepancies in who mandates training, who conducts it, and the length of time between trainings and certification periods creates an elections environment in which election workers receive vastly different preparation ahead of the election depending on their state or jurisdiction. Consistent, standardized, professionalized trainings would improve the preparation of election workers, and strengthen election security.

Of the 42 states that mandate training, 34 states and the District of Columbia require all temporary election workers to undergo training before serving. Eight states only require certain election workers to undergo training. For example, [in Indiana](#), only precinct election officers are required to attend training.

Temporary election workers are mainly trained to perform routine, clerical duties. The challenge with these part-time positions is that the workers exercise their competencies only twice a year and, in many cases, biennially. Most states mandate temporary election worker training at the state level but rely on counties or municipalities to conduct the training. In other states, a political party or third-party entity can conduct the training.

Funding for training also varies by state. While some states fund election worker training entirely at the state level, others require local jurisdictions to pick up the cost. Some states compensate election workers for the time required to undergo training. This incentivizes budget-strapped local jurisdictions to shorten trainings to cut costs.

Many state election offices create materials that counties use to conduct training. Online materials such as videos and interactive modules often complement in-person training; in some states, online training has replaced in-person training for certain election worker roles.

The length of time required for training varies by state and locality. Most states train election workers for just a few hours. [Maricopa County, Arizona](#), by contrast, offers two full days of paid training for election workers. In many states, the counties decide how much training to offer based on their election offices' resources. Some state election offices hire forensic specialists to support temporary staff who are learning how to verify signatures on mail ballots.

Some states have election worker certification programs for staff who complete training. These programs promote the professional development of temporary staff. They also help retain election workers whose certification lasts several years. In [New Jersey](#) training and certification are required for election workers every two years. [Connecticut](#) requires training and certification every four years, corresponding to presidential election years. As new election laws are enacted, training is necessary to implement them outside of the regular training schedule.

TEMPORARY ELECTION WORKER CONDUCT AND INTEGRITY

As public-facing, county and municipal appointees, election workers are subject to a variety of mechanisms to ensure their professionalism. As with training, these measures and safeguards vary from state to state, but there are three primary policies that improve election worker conduct:

1. Election worker's **terms of employment** provide a signed, written document that outlines conduct, performance expectations, and dismissal policies.
2. Election worker's **oaths and codes of conduct** ask temporary employees to sign a document committing them to doing their duties honestly and faithfully.
3. **Party affiliation requirements** provide a way for election offices to ensure that bipartisan teams are available to perform election-related tasks.

Counties or municipal appointing authorities are typically responsible for creating election worker conduct and integrity policies. The lack of uniformity within states causes disparities in acceptable conduct and raises questions about when election workers should be dismissed for misconduct, what qualifies as misconduct, and who is permitted to dismiss an election worker. Unclear dismissal policies threaten election security: A dismissible offense in one jurisdiction may not be grounds for termination elsewhere.

1. Terms of Employment

Some states present the terms of employment to election workers more formally than others, which may affect election worker behavior. These operative documents hold workers accountable in the event of misconduct.

Performance expectations include qualifications, terms, and appointments, as well as roles, job duties, and functions. Sometimes these expectations are outlined at the state level. For example, the [Virginia Department of Election's "Officer of Elections Basics" page](#) describes all the expectations for officers of elections. Similarly, Maricopa County's Elections Department website has a ["Get Involved" page](#) that outlines each different part-time role needed for its elections and includes pay and schedule, skills, requirements, and working conditions.

Election worker oaths, discussed next, are foundational; however, the precision by which election worker duties are specified in terms of employment and the processes to supervise and make course corrections, when necessary, form the true basis for disciplinary action. We encourage each state and jurisdiction to devise processes for holding workers accountable to established standards in real time. Disciplinary policies could include counseling workers on proper procedures, issuing warnings not to repeat certain actions, and dismissing workers who violate their terms of employment.

Dismissal Policies

Examples from Colorado, Michigan, and Ohio

Colorado outlines the grounds for dismissal of election judges in its state code. Colorado Revised Statute § 1-6-120 reads:

Election judges who neglect their duties, who commit, encourage, or connive in any fraud in connection with their duties, who violate any of the election laws or knowingly permit others to do so, who are convicted of any crime, who violate their oath, who wrongfully hamper or interfere or tend to interfere with the regular performance of the duties of the other election judges, who commit any other act that interferes or tends to interfere with a fair and honest registration and election, or who are not appointed in accordance with the provisions of this article may be removed.

Michigan only outlines punishment for election workers who fail to report to their designated polling place on Election Day. Michigan Election Law § 168.931 reads:

In a city, township, village, or school district that has a board of election commissioners authorized to appoint inspectors of election, an inspector of election, a clerk, or other election official who accepts an appointment as an inspector of election shall not fail to report at the polling place designated on election morning at the time specified by the board of election commissioners, unless excused as provided in this subdivision. A person who violates this subdivision is guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of not more than \$10.00 or imprisonment for not more than 10 days, or both.

In Ohio, removal of precinct workers depends on the determination of the board. Ohio Election Law § 3501.22 reads:

The board [of elections] may summarily remove any precinct election official from office at any time for neglect of duty, malfeasance, misconduct in office, or any other good and sufficient reason.

Without codified procedures that detail how to handle misconduct, election workers face unclear expectations, which threatens consistency and security in the election process. As shown above, Colorado, Michigan, and Ohio have vastly different policies when it comes to election worker dismissal. Many states do not have any policy for dismissal and rely on counties to develop procedures that detail grounds for termination. Some local jurisdictions report a full-scale lack of formal dismissal policies for their temporary election workers. Others report having to pursue legal action to remove unruly workers from their position. States without a formalized dismissal policy pose a security concern to the election system, since there is not an official mechanism to remove workers undermine election integrity.

2. Election Worker Oaths

What the Data Show

- **40 states and the District of Columbia require election workers to take an oath before beginning their duties in an election office.**
- **Nine states do not have oath requirements at the state level.** Three of these states—Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington—are all vote by mail states with no in-person voting and do not have oath requirements because they do not have traditional election workers. In the other six states, oaths are required at the local level but are not required by the state.

Why Election Worker Oaths Matter

The oath of office is a foundational element that holds public employees and officials accountable. Although criminal charges rarely result from oath violations, they serve as a pillar in determining employee performance and integrity.

Some counties will display their signed election workers' oaths within viewing distance for election observers to see. By displaying election worker oaths publicly, election officials exhibit professionalism and integrity. Some states require individuals working on absent voting counting boards to take an additional oath not to share anything they learn about an election outcome. This serves as an added security mechanism to protect the secrecy of ballots.

Standard, statewide oaths set a tone of consistency and professionalism for election administration.

Election Worker Oaths of Office

Examples from Michigan and Florida

A sample oath from the Michigan Constitution oath of public officers says:

All officers, legislative, executive and judicial, before entering upon the duties of their respective offices, shall take and subscribe the following oath or affirmation: I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the constitution of this state, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of according to the best of my ability. No other oath, affirmation, or any religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust.

Florida's election code states:

Each inspector and each clerk shall take and subscribe to an oath or affirmation, which shall be written or printed, to the effect that [they] will perform the duties of inspector or clerk of election, respectively, according to law and will endeavor to prevent all fraud, deceit, or abuse in conducting the election. The oath may be taken before an officer authorized to administer oaths or before any of the persons who are to act as inspectors, one of them to swear the others, and one of the others sworn thus, in turn, to administer the oath to the one who has not been sworn. The oaths shall be returned with the poll list and the returns of the election to the supervisor.

3. Election Worker Party Affiliation

What the Data Show

- [47 states](#) mandate a specific political party makeup of temporary election workers.

Why Partisan Parity Requirements Matter

Intentionally selecting election workers from both major political parties serves as a transparency mechanism and affirms that the two parties have the same insight into the election process and thus can validate the results.

This policy takes several forms: Some states require that a certain number of election workers be selected from the county's leading political party and a certain number be selected from the county's second-leading political party. Others require that all poll managers (typically two per precinct) come from different political parties. Some states even specify the proportion of unaffiliated voters who can serve as election workers.

The requirements for disclosure of party affiliation by election workers differ between states. Some states rely on the major political parties in the state to nominate election workers; others have no information on the partisan affiliation of their election worker.

Many states will not hire election workers who are unaffiliated with a political party. This practice often excludes independent or unaffiliated voters from participating in the election process.

The party nomination process for election workers seeks to ensure that political parties have equal representation in the election process. For states that do not require parties to nominate election workers, many require election workers to disclose their political affiliation for the same purpose. In many states, the purpose of party disclosure is to ensure that the management of polling places and the handling of ballots have checks and balances

For jurisdiction where most constituents have the same political affiliation, election officials can struggle to find workers from the other political party. Further complicating matters, many states only allow constituents who live within the relevant jurisdiction to serve as an election worker. This policy option has three primary benefits: (1) it cultivates a culture of local civic participation, (2) it prevents the risk that nefarious individuals from outside the jurisdiction could interfere with that jurisdiction's elections, and (3) it yields a system in which election workers more closely mirror the constituents of the jurisdiction at large. That said, limiting a jurisdiction to residents alone can make it more challenging to recruit enough election workers. It can also make it challenging to recruit a balanced number of election workers from each major party, particularly in heavily Democratic or Republican areas. In recent years, some states, like Michigan, have moved from requiring election workers to be registered voters of their city or township to registered voters in the state.

Recently, however, some partisan actors have begun taking advantage of partisan parity laws by introducing a slew of new election workers in advance of the 2022 general election. In certain jurisdictions the onslaught of new election workers has resulted in experienced election workers being pushed out, especially in counties that lean heavily Democratic or Republican. Due to partisan parity laws, if one party that has traditionally been underrepresented submits new election workers, election offices may have to exclude experienced election workers in favor of those from the opposite party. Although the importance of engaging voters in the election process cannot be understated, maintaining a balance between new and veteran election workers is critical to the smooth administration of an election. Election workers who have served for several years acquire an institutional knowledge that takes time to pass down to newer election workers.

ELECTION WORKER PROTECTIONS

National election worker shortages and [threats to election workers](#) have created a challenging hiring environment for election offices. Offices across the country [have reported](#) difficulty recruiting workers due to a rise in threats to election workers.

Colorado, Maine, and Oregon have responded to the rising threats by increasing legal protections for election workers. In April 2022, Maine passed [LD 1821](#), increasing penalties for a person who “intentionally interferes by force, violence, or intimidation ... with a public official ... performing an official function relating to a federal, state, or municipal election.” Similarly, Colorado passed [HB22-1273](#) in June 2022, which makes it “unlawful for a person to threaten, coerce, or intimidate an election official.” In Colorado’s law, “election officials” include election judges, who are the part-time election workers equivalent to election workers in other states.

[Colorado’s law](#) goes further to protect the personal information of election officials and their families with the intention of providing protections against the doxing of election workers. Doxing refers to the use of private, identifiable information to harass or threaten individuals.

These laws are part of a national trend to protect election workers and promote election security by securing the individuals running the elections. That said, most states have not enacted laws specifically addressing protections to election workers. All states have laws that can be used to charge those threatening election workers.

Given the national and interstate nature of the threats, protecting election workers should not be the states’ burden to bear alone. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Election Crimes Task Force should be [doing more](#) to provide guidance to local and state law enforcement to ensure the adequate protection of election workers.

Conclusion

Partisan conflict threatens the integrity of our election system. Clarifying state standards for temporary election workers presents an opportunity to improve election security, build trust, and insulate elections from partisan actors.

Clear state standards on election worker training, conduct, and protections would also mitigate the risks of insider threats and human errors. The Bipartisan Policy Center will release detailed policy recommendations to shore up poll worker policies in early 2023. Elections are a human enterprise – they rely on individuals conducting their job with integrity to function. Rules and procedures for election workers fortify the integrity of these mission-critical individuals.

Appendix

A note about the data:

Below is the data that we compiled and validated from several resources. This data set is current as of October 2022. If you notice any changes or catch any errors, please reach out to us at ggordon@bipartisanpolicy.org. We would like to extend a special thank-you to the election officials who helped to edit this report, especially the [BPC Task Force on Elections](#).

Methodology:

The data are sourced from the [Election Assistance Commission's 2020 Poll Worker Compendium](#) and the [National Counsel for State Legislature's research on poll worker policy](#). We checked each state's election code for changes to poll worker policies since the EAC and NCSL collected their data in 2020.

Dataset:

[Digital Link](#)

[PDF Link](#)

State	Poll worker training required by state law	Who is required to attend training	Election worker oath required	States strive for political parity in their election workers
ALABAMA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	Certain election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
ALASKA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
ARIZONA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
ARKANSAS	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
CALIFORNIA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath NOT required	Does not require partisan parity
COLORADO	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
CONNECTICUT	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Does not require partisan parity
DELAWARE	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
FLORIDA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
GEORGIA	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
HAWAII	Temporary election worker training NOT required by state law	Training not required	Election worker oath NOT required	Does not require partisan parity
IDAHO	Temporary election worker training required by state law	Certain election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath NOT required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
ILLINOIS	Temporary election worker training required by state law	Certain election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
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MAINE	Temporary election worker training NOT required by state law	Training not required	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers

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WISCONSIN	Temporary election worker training required by state law	All election workers required to attend training	Election worker oath required	Mandates a specific political party makeup of election workers
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