

Dēmos Briefing Paper Series

CHALLENGES to Fair Elections



Poll Worker Training

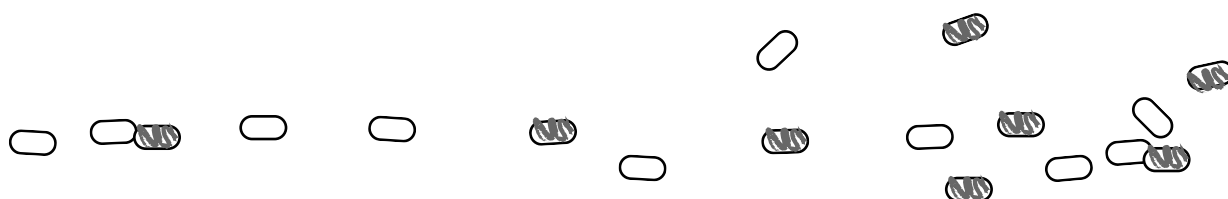
If elections are the foundation of our democracy, then poll workers are the gears and wheels that make the mechanics of democracy function on Election Day. Regrettably, this human factor is often overlooked and under-supported. States squeak by each year with a bare minimum of poll workers who receive inadequate training for an increasingly complex task. Recent surveys, press accounts, and troubled primary elections attest to the problem.

Where to Watch

Maryland: After a disastrous primary, where dozens of polling places opened late and some voters were directed to cast ballots using scrap pieces of paper, Maryland election officials are scrambling to hire and train thousands of new poll workers. Finding sufficient volunteers has been a challenge.

Cuyahoga County, Ohio: The May 2006 primary was hamstrung by a nearly 20 percent absentee rate among poll workers. Polls opened late and election staff had difficulty operating the new voting machines. Seventy memory cards with vote tallies were lost.¹

Since the primary election, officials have partnered with Cuyahoga County Community College to administer a revamped poll worker training program. All elections staff must now show that they can perform basic voting machine tasks and pass a written exam before working at the polls in November. Initial feedback has been positive.² The voters will now judge whether these measures are adequate when they cast ballots in Ohio's closely-contested races on November 7.



Better poll worker training would have prevented a significant number of problems during the fall primaries.

- A survey of booth workers at polling sites in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, conducted after the 2006 primary, showed that 57 percent did not feel that they had enough hands-on practice using the machines before the election; 51 percent did not feel that their training gave them sufficient information to do their job well; and 41 percent observed differences between how they were taught to use the machines and how the machines operated during the election. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a third of booth workers experienced difficulty setting up the machines, and 45 percent had trouble closing them down at the end of the election. The same survey showed that 53 percent of election workers thought the training's coverage of election law and administration was inadequate.³
- In Maryland, insufficient poll workers as well as human error and inadequate training contributed to a messy primary in September 2006. Some precincts did not receive the voter access cards needed to start voting machines. And results were delayed in some races when machine memory cards, holding vote counts from eight precincts in Anne Arundel County, were initially misplaced and otherwise mishandled in ways that could compromise the security of the elections. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, "Most of [the primary's] worst problems could be traced to the fact that too many of the state's 20,000 election workers didn't show up for work, forgot crucial supplies or couldn't operate the equipment."⁴

Many poll workers earn less than they would flipping hamburgers.

- Elections experts despair at the fact that poll workers are sometimes paid less for a grueling day at the polls than what they could earn at a fast food restaurant. The recruitment of highly skilled volunteers suffers, and election administrators are left to resort to civic appeals to fill perennially understaffed polling places.⁵ For example, in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, poll workers receive \$172.10 for a minimum of nineteen hours of work, including training.⁶ In Anne Arundel County, Maryland, poll workers are paid either \$130 (for chief judges) or \$100 (for all other workers) for a fourteen-hour day.⁷ The situation is somewhat better in places like New York City, where poll workers receive \$200 for working, at minimum, a 15.5 hour day.

Qualified poll workers are least available where most needed.

- The shortage of qualified poll workers is particularly acute in communities of color, where voting rights and fair elections are historically most challenged. According to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, in the 2004 election, predominantly African-American jurisdictions had a much higher percentage of precincts and polling sites with staffing shortages: 17 percent per polling place, and 13 percent per precinct. This contrasts sharply with the national picture: 6 percent of total polling places and 4 percent of precincts lacked the minimum number of required poll workers in the 2004 election.⁸

The computerization of U.S. elections presents special challenges for an aging and under-trained work force at the polls.

- The average poll worker age in 2004 was 72.⁹ Staffing polling places with tech-savvy volunteers, and properly training existing poll workers, will become increasingly essential as states introduce high-tech voting equipment and computerized voter registries. The magnitude of that human resource challenge can be alarming. A survey in Cuyahoga County, Ohio found that 21 percent of poll workers there in the 2006 primary admitted to being "not very comfortable" or "not at all comfortable" with computers. The percentage of workers who felt that their training gave them the information needed to do their job well correlated with age; those over age 65 expressed the lowest comfort levels. The surveyors surmised that younger workers might have had more familiarity with technology and thus satisfaction with training procedures.¹⁰

Absentee rates are high among those who volunteer to work the polls.

- For every three poll workers trained, only two actually show up for work on Election Day.¹¹ In San Joaquin County, California, “dozens” of poll workers went AWOL on Election Day in the June primary, leaving some precincts with workers that couldn’t even turn on the new machines because they hadn’t attended the required training.¹² Poor pay, long and at times intense hours, and inadequate training help explain high no-show rates on Election Day.

Current poll worker training is inadequate for the breadth of issues presented on Election Day.

- Poll worker training curricula are clearly inadequate for the breadth of issues that poll workers are called upon to address on Election Day. State implementation of the federal Help America Vote Act requires conversance with new voting machine technology, provisional balloting, voter identification, and other election mandates.
- Provisional balloting is a case in point. The 2004 election saw poll workers fail to inform voters that they had the right to a provisional ballot, give voters incorrect ballots, and provide incorrect information on how to use a provisional ballot and under what circumstances it would count.¹³

Our democracy deserves better. Poll workers deserve to be compensated fairly for the invaluable work they do, and trained sufficiently to perform it. Voters will reap the benefits of that public investment, with more smoothly run and effective elections.

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