

Poll Worker Recruitment in the 2020 General Election

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Abstract:

Poll worker recruitment and retention were among the main concerns facing election officials in advance of the 2020 general election. As the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the United States in the spring of 2020, many poll workers, who historically have skewed older, declined to staff in-person voting locations. This led to major staffing shortages in the early 2020 spring primaries. However, herculean recruitment efforts and creative partnerships mobilized by election officials and organizations across the country produced a sufficient number of volunteers in most jurisdictions for the November election. As a result, most in-person voting locations were able to stay open and process ballots efficiently, contributing to a smoothly run general election.

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- [“Poll Worker Recruitment,”](#) Adam Smith, Christopher Wan, Jae Yoo, Aaron Bray, Colette Mayer, and Jacob McCall (October 26, 2020).

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I. Introduction

Recruiting sufficient numbers of poll workers has presented a challenge for election administrators for several years. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the problem by shrinking the reliable pool of veteran poll workers who, on average, were over 60 years of age and at greater risk of suffering serious health complications from COVID-19. In several of the 2020 primaries, states experienced poll worker shortages sufficient to prevent opening many of their polling places or operating their existing polling places at full capacity. In response, states, local governments, and nonprofits launched a massive effort to recruit a new crop of poll workers for the general election. This report looks into some of the strategies and techniques employed to recruit over 700,000 potential new poll workers for the 2020 general election.

II. Recent History of Poll Worker Shortages

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, election officials in many jurisdictions faced shortages of poll workers. Data from all 50 states submitted to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) indicated that election officials in [more than two-thirds](#) of the 6,459 jurisdictions around the country had found it “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers for the general election in November 2018. Only 15% of the jurisdictions indicated it had been “somewhat easy” or “very easy” to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers. According to a 2018 [New York Times article](#), roughly 70% of potential poll workers for Manhattan dropped out between recruitment and the mandatory training session prior to the election, and as many as 15% of poll workers failed to show up for duty on Election Day.

Results of the EAC biennial surveys on election administration and voting suggest that the shortage of poll workers has been getting worse. In [2016](#), 64.6% of responding jurisdictions reported having a “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult” time recruiting poll workers; in [2018](#), that figure increased to 68.2%. In 2016, just over 30% of responding jurisdictions reported having a somewhat easy or very easy time; in 2018, that number dropped to 15%.

The difficulty in obtaining a sufficient number of poll workers has persisted despite a [continued decrease](#) in the number of physical polling places to staff and an increase in the use of alternative options to voting in person on Election Day, such as early in-person voting, mail voting, and dropping off absentee ballots at drop boxes. According to state responses to the EAC survey, in the last [three midterm elections](#) the total number of poll workers dropped from around 770,000 in 2010 to just under 640,000 in 2018.

The EAC [noted](#) that more populous jurisdictions have experienced greater challenges in recruiting poll workers. Of the 50 jurisdictions with the highest number of registered voters in 2016, 88% reported that it was “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers, significantly higher than the national average. Only 12% of these 50 largest jurisdictions reported that it was “somewhat easy” or “very easy.” Just one week away from the 2018 primary, the [Board of Elections of New York](#) still needed to fill about 6,400 vacancies (out of approximately 34,000 poll workers needed).

III. The Pandemic’s Impact on Poll Worker Recruitment

The pandemic exacerbated the poll worker shortages that typically confront election officials. The threat of contracting or transmitting the coronavirus prompted many of the traditional pool of poll workers, especially older poll workers, and members of other vulnerable populations, to stay home.

A. COVID-19 Risks Were Higher for the Senior-Aged Poll Worker

As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that older adults were especially vulnerable to developing severe complications with COVID-19. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that [8 in 10](#) coronavirus deaths in the U.S. were individuals over age 65, and people aged 65 to 74 were 90 times more likely to die and five times more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 than 18-to-29-year-olds.

Traditionally, most poll workers were over age 60. According to an [EAC report](#), almost 60% of poll workers were over age 61 in 2018, with just over a quarter of the total poll workers were over the age of 70. Those percentages were fairly consistent between [2016](#) and 2018. In some states, the proportion of poll workers who were 61 or older was [even greater](#). For example, in Maine, Montana, Oklahoma, and Alabama, around two-thirds or more of poll workers in 2016 were 61 or older. In [Oklahoma](#), the average age of poll workers was 70 in 2016.

Poll workers under the age of 26 accounted for just under [10%](#) of poll workers nationwide in 2016, and under 8% in 2018. In 2016, only five states exceeded the national average for poll workers 25 and younger: in California, roughly 25% of poll workers were 25 and younger, and in Delaware, Michigan, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., between 10% and 14% of poll workers were 25 and younger.

B. Prospective Poll Workers Were Concerned About Safety

Poll workers said they were more likely to volunteer during the pandemic if they knew that robust safety measures were in place. Professor Bob Stein of Rice University conducted a [survey](#) of respondents in Texas related to poll worker recruitment. The survey asked respondents about their willingness to serve under the various conditions and safety protocols. It found that approximately 85% of 1,800 respondents said they would be “very or somewhat likely” to serve if the polling station provided personal protective equipment (PPE), installed plexiglass screens, or imposed social distancing requirements. Approximately 70% of survey respondents said they would be very or somewhat likely to serve if the polling station was drive-thru, was outdoors, or restricted voting to one person at a time. Only about 50% of respondents said they would be very or somewhat likely to serve if the polling station used pre-coronavirus voting protocols.

Proper safety procedures can be effective in limiting the spread of the coronavirus and the risk that poll workers contract the virus. In [South Korea’s](#) April parliamentary election, for instance, the country instituted mandatory policies for social distancing and the use of masks, plastic gloves, and disinfectants in polling places. The country announced that not one case of coronavirus infection related to the election was reported during the 14-day incubation period, despite 29 million voters (including [those in quarantine](#)) having participated in the election.

C. Many Veteran Poll Workers Opted to Stay Home During the 2020 Elections

The heightened risks associated with COVID-19 for older individuals had a substantial impact on poll worker recruitment in the 2020 election cycle. As shown in Table 1, only 38% of voters over 65 years old said they would be willing to work the polls under “normal polling conditions” (meaning pre-pandemic precinct conditions with no PPE or distancing requirements), compared to 54% of those under 65 years old who said they would be willing to work under those same conditions.

As a result, many states suffered from poll worker shortages during their primaries and, in the [17 states](#) that held primary and runoff elections in August, poll worker shortages were the most common challenge for the administration of in-person voting. Below are examples of states and counties that faced shortages before or during their primaries:

- **Alaska:** The director of elections in Alaska announced on the eve of the state’s August primary that [six polling locations](#) would not open because of inadequate staffing, forcing residents to vote at different locations or absentee at the last minute.
- **Arizona:** [Mohave County](#) officials had to staff 37 polling locations in August with only “[skeleton crews](#)” of around 60% the typical number of poll workers.
- **Florida:** 8% of poll workers in Miami-Dade County declined to work in [Florida’s March primary](#), near the beginning of the pandemic.
 - **Pasco County:** Pasco County which had 1,043 workers for the 2018 general election, saw a “[hemorrhaging](#)” of poll workers, as [150](#) workers dropped out within a week after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the county.
 - **Pinellas County:** Pinellas County [faced a shortage](#) after more than 260 of its approximately 1,700 poll workers withdrew.
- **Kansas:** A shortage of poll workers caused closures during the August primary that [forced some voters to travel further](#) to vote.
- **Kentucky:** Three days before the June primary, only 24 people had volunteered to work the polls in [Warren County](#), compared to the usual 400 poll workers (The average age of a poll worker in Warren County pre-pandemic was 72.)
- **Illinois:** On the day before the March primary, Cook County [still had only about 5,600](#) workers—down significantly from the usual 8,000.
- **Michigan:** [In Michigan’s](#) August primary, some [Detroit](#) polling places opened late because of poll worker no-shows, a development election officials attributed to pandemic safety concerns.
- **New York:** [New York](#) suffered a shortage of poll workers in its June primary, as [large numbers](#) of its elderly poll workers declined to work. [Thousands](#) also declined to work the polls for the November general election.
- **Ohio:** Officials in [Ohio](#) reported that for every poll worker the state signed up for its March primary, it had lost three poll workers due to concerns over public health.
- **Pennsylvania:** [Pennsylvania](#) saw massive poll worker shortages across the state for its June primary.
 - **Allegheny County:** [85%](#) of polling places in Allegheny County closed because of poll worker shortages.
 - **Philadelphia County:** [75%](#) of polling places in Philadelphia County closed because of poll worker shortages.
- **Wisconsin:** During Wisconsin’s April primary, shortly after the initial pandemic surge in the U.S., Milwaukee was relying on just under 30% of its typical number of poll workers—[400 of 1,400](#). Milwaukee’s shortage was so severe that, out of its usual 180 polling places, [only five remained open](#) for in-person voting for the April primary.

IV. Approaches to Poll Worker Recruitment

As a result of these staffing shortages during the primaries, jurisdictions were tasked with mobilizing quickly to recruit younger poll workers and first-time poll workers to fill the gaps in advance of the general election. Municipalities, nonprofits, schools, businesses, and other organizations created innovative ways to help election officials recruit poll workers during the coronavirus pandemic. Some organizations, such as [Power the Polls](#) and [Poll Hero](#), emerged specifically to recruit poll workers nationwide for the 2020 election. Many existing groups that had been focused on youth voting and civic engagement—[Campus Vote Project](#), [Campus Compact](#), and [Students Learn Students Vote Coalition](#)—expanded their work to include recruiting student poll workers. States and localities created and mobilized new marketing strategies, and some increased hazard pay. Secretaries of state and other election officials also worked with businesses to recruit poll workers, including by paying their employees to serve as poll workers or by “adopting” an entire polling place.

A. Nationwide Efforts

i. United States Election Assistance Commission

In response to the critical poll worker shortages caused by the pandemic, the United States Election Assistance Commission (EAC), on August 10, announced the designation of September 1, 2020, as “[National Poll Worker Recruitment Day](#).” The aim was to encourage more people to sign up to become election workers for the November election. The goal of the day was to raise awareness about the benefits and importance of poll working and inspire more Americans to volunteer. The EAC created a [toolkit](#), with resources, graphics, and sample social media posts, and [encouraged](#) organizations and companies to support National Poll Worker Recruitment Day by spreading the word, recruiting employees to participate, and offering employees time off to volunteer as poll workers. Participating municipalities and organizations received additional resources for messaging, social media guidance, and ideas for activities to help raise awareness in their communities.

ii. Nonprofit Organizations

After poll worker shortages “wreaked havoc” on spring primary elections, [Power the Polls](#) (PTP) emerged as a major force for poll worker recruitment. PTP formed around a mission of recruiting hundreds of thousands of poll workers across the country to help alleviate poll worker shortages. PTP used information from [WorkElections.com](#) to connect potential poll

workers to election officials in over 4,000 jurisdictions nationwide via a single portal. Through PTP, applicants were connected to their specific jurisdiction, with follow-up emails containing [information](#) on poll worker compensation, hours, training and eligibility requirements, and how to apply.. PTP also partnered with secretary of state offices, local election officials, and statewide non-governmental organizations to keep applicants up to date on training requirements and timing.

Power the Polls created a heavy presence on [social media](#), such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Tiktok, to recruit younger poll workers and publicize endorsements from major [influencers](#). Comedians on traditional media also promoted PTP, including [The Daily Show with Trevor Noah](#) and [Full Frontal with Samantha Bee](#). The organization had hundreds of national and local [partners](#) recruiting among their workforces. By November, PTP had recruited over [700,000 poll workers](#) for the general election, far exceeding their original goal of 250,000 poll workers.

Power the Polls went beyond recruitment, helping to [ensure](#) that volunteers were in the right place at the right time on Election Day and that back-up volunteers could be easily contacted if needed. PTP kept track of their recruits who were placed, as well as those who were officially waitlisted with their jurisdiction, and sent a number of reminders and confirmation communications to them via text, email, and voicemail to make sure that every recruit showed up to their shift on Election Day and every back-up recruit was ready to be deployed for any last-minute emergencies. To further these efforts, PTP created an “[Election Administrator Hotline](#),” open from Saturday, October 31, through Tuesday, November 3, for administrators to call PTP for reinforcements, if they faced a last-minute volunteer shortage.

Power the Polls partnered with local and state nonprofits groups in many jurisdictions across the country to assist with recruitment and placement in precincts. In battleground states, these partnerships included:

- Arizona: Arizona Advocacy Network
- Florida: America Votes, Florida Voices
- Georgia: ProGeorgia, Fair Fight, ACLU Georgia
- Maine: Maine Votes, Maine Voices, Democracy Maine, League of Women Voters
- Michigan: League of Conservation Voters Michigan, ACLU Michigan
- Nevada: Silver State Voices
- New Hampshire: America Votes
- North Carolina: Democracy North Carolina
- Pennsylvania: The Voter Project
- Wisconsin: Wisconsin Voices

A number of other groups, such as [The Poll Hero Project](#), [Campus Vote Project](#), [Campus Compact](#), and the [Students Learn Students Vote Coalition](#), focused their recruitment efforts on high school and college students to serve as poll workers in the 2020 election.

[The Poll Hero Project](#) is a student-led and student-focused organization founded in early 2020. Students at Princeton University, Denver East High School, and Chicago Booth School of Business saw the issues caused by staffing shortages in the spring primaries and focused on recruiting young poll workers. The project consisted of about 100 high school and college students who recruited through [social media](#) campaigns and individual outreach to their peers. Though the project was initially targeted towards specific cities where they saw the most need for poll workers—Philadelphia, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Phoenix—their success and reach grew until they had teams nationwide. Poll Hero’s co-founder, Ella Gantman, explained to [The Daily Princetonian](#) that the group motivated its participants “first and foremost, by focusing on the election and for democracy, but we also want to give them another incentive if they choose to volunteer.” These “incentives” included everything from creating an easy-to-use volunteer checklist called “The Journey” to teaming up with different organizations to co-host Zoom calls with celebrities and giving out prizes. Poll Hero ultimately signed up over 37,000 poll workers (approximately [two-thirds](#) of them high school students), with a budget of just \$1,000.

Campus Compact’s [Safe Election Project](#) also targeted students, in partnership with Power the Polls. Campus Compact (a national coalition of colleges and universities dedicated to campus-based civic engagement) enlisted, trained, and paid “Student Recruiters” on college campuses to work virtually over the course of three weeks to educate their peers about the need for poll workers, how to help, and where to sign up. These recruiters went on to enlist over 4,700 of their fellow students to serve as poll workers for the November 2020 election.

iii. National Corporations

Civic Alliance, a nonpartisan coalition of businesses, [partnered](#) with Power the Polls and [announced](#) in August 2020 that more than 60 of its “member companies”—including Starbucks, Old Navy, Target, and Microsoft—would work to encourage their employees and consumers to serve as poll workers. Old Navy announced on September 1 that its employees would receive a day’s worth of pay if they signed up to work at the polls, in addition to any compensation they received from their local jurisdiction. Target, Warby Parker, and D.C.-based coffee chain Compass Coffee also gave workers paid time off to serve as election workers. Starbucks, Twitter, PayPal, Walmart, and Uber gave workers time off to vote—some offering as few as three hours of paid leave, while others giving employees Election Day off. Civic Alliance also [connected](#) companies with the appropriate election officials in order to offer publicly accessible spaces for voting, when traditional venues, such as senior centers and schools, were not

available for polling. Through a partnership with Mission for Masks and the C19 Coalition, Civic Alliance also helped match election officials in need of PPE with corporate suppliers of masks, face shields, and disposable gloves.

iv. National Reports and Resources

The Center for American Progress [published](#) a report providing recommendations for recruiting and retaining poll workers amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The report included general recommendations as well as separate recommendations for individuals, state and local governments, professional associations, political parties, high schools, colleges and universities, nonprofits and philanthropic organizations, and religious communities. The general recommendations included relaxing or eliminating requirements that would prevent otherwise qualified individuals from filling poll worker shortages. The report also recommended offering employees paid time off for serving as poll workers and exploring the feasibility of offering free child care services for poll workers.

The Center for Tech and Civic Life collected recruitment success stories from various jurisdictions and [published](#) them in a report entitled “50 Ideas for Recruiting and Retaining Election Workers.” These ideas included how to recruit specific pools of people—such as high school students, bilingual populations, and lawyers—and how to implement strategies, such as making online sign-ups easy or focusing on underserved areas. CTCL also provided tips for effective messaging and retaining election workers. Separately, CTCL [compiled](#) a list of “27 Ideas for Encouraging Youth Participation in Elections,” including poll worker recruitment.

In May 2020, a team of designers from the Design School at Stanford University (“d.school”) [launched](#) an effort to use human-centered design to contribute to protecting voter participation in the November election. The d.school focused its research on how to reduce the health risks and stress associated with voting during a global pandemic. Many of the d.school’s resulting publications were tailored to poll workers and poll worker recruiters, such as “[Is It Safe To Be A Poll Worker?](#),” a series of one-page handouts designed to be used by election administrators to share information about the safety of serving as a poll worker and spending time inside a polling place. The d. School also published “[Working Elections During Coronavirus](#),” a ready-to-use training module for poll workers on how to keep themselves and voters safe from coronavirus infection, meant to augment existing poll worker training; and a “[Framework to Understand and Respond to Possible Disruptions at the Polls](#),” a template for election administrators to use to help poll workers—especially first-time poll workers—understand the possible disruptions that might arise and how to respond. The d.school also made videos to “Ask an Election Expert” about various election topics, including “[What to Expect: Working the](#)

[Polls During coronavirus.](#)” The d.school’s work was [used](#) in jurisdictions such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida to help train volunteers.

B. State and Local Government Efforts

States and localities came up with innovative ways to make up for their last-minute poll worker shortages through creative partnerships with businesses, nonprofits, and schools, as well as monetary incentives. These efforts began early in the summer, and some states with primaries later in the summer were able to implement changes in policies and programs to combat poll worker shortages in time for their primaries. For example, Tennessee [launched](#) a recruitment campaign in June and, by July, [recruited](#) nearly 3,000 poll workers, sufficient to staff all polling sites in time for the August 6 primary.

None of [Alaska’s](#) districts had enough election workers two months prior to its August primary, and 27 out of the state’s 40 districts were less than 50% staffed. To address the shortage, the state turned to local nonprofits and its own employees. Under Alaska’s new “Adopt-A-Precinct” program, nonprofit organizations could sign up to staff a polling station, and the state would pay that nonprofit instead of the volunteers. The state also asked its employees to help. Any state worker could ask to work a polling place on Election Day and would receive their regular salary for the day. The Alaska Division of Elections also [increased](#) election workers’ hourly pay by \$3—from \$12 to \$15. Just over a week before the primary election, a few small communities in [western Alaska](#) still did not have any poll workers signed up, and the state Division of Elections [closed](#) six polling places for the primary. However, by November 2, the Division of Elections [reported](#) that it had overcome any concerns about a shortage of poll workers in most places across Alaska.

A number of other states and localities instituted similar “adopt-a-polling-place” programs for the 2020 election. These programs involved local election boards providing nonprofits, companies, and other groups with poll worker training and resources in exchange for supplying adequate staff for a particular precinct. Some jurisdictions offered additional incentives for adopting a polling place. In [Solano County](#), California, for example, the county offered compensation to groups that adopted a polling place, as well as the option to display the group’s name outside the polling place and to the county’s community partners list, highlighted on the county website and mentioned during a county board of supervisors meeting. Groups were also given Election Day shirts to wear while working. The [City of Milwaukee](#) Election Commission instituted a similar program, “Adopt-A-Voting-Site,” promising participants that the commission would “recognize all voting site sponsors through a number of opportunities, including website recognition, signage at the voting site, and press release mentions.” The

[Sumter County, Florida](#), Supervisor of Elections promoted an “Adopt-a-Precinct” program by asserting that it would be “an excellent way to raise funds for your organization or charity to help reach your goals and objectives.” Organizations in Sumter could potentially earn up to \$2,200 per precinct adopted (including time spent in training).

Several jurisdictions found that increasing the pay for poll workers increased the number of people willing to work elections. Poll workers in [Milwaukee](#) were given \$100 in hazard pay for both the August primary and the general election. [Philadelphia](#) raised poll worker pay as well, which may have been partially responsible for the [increase](#) in poll worker recruitment it saw between the primary and general election. Like Alaska, some states offered additional payment statewide to help attract poll workers. [In Alabama](#), for example, state officials used emergency federal money allocated to pay poll workers an additional \$25 per day for working during the U.S. Senate runoff election in July, as well as the general election in November. The Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL) [provided](#) additional resources to jurisdictions across the country to “administer a voting process that is more safe and secure for their communities.” Out of 2,500 election offices who received [preliminary](#) funding, approximately 1,800 indicated they would spend some of the money on poll workers.

Two months before the general election, Ohio was still 4,000 poll workers short of the minimum number of poll workers it needed. The secretary of state’s office spearheaded numerous initiatives to bolster recruitment. The office created a [poll worker recruitment tracker](#), which included a breakdown of poll workers still needed in each county as determined by each county’s board of elections. It also kept a column with the target number of poll workers counties should recruit in order to compensate for any cancellations or no-shows. This was the first time the state had collected and shared broadly such information before an election. The office also targeted high schoolers through a “[Youth at the Booth](#)” program, which recruited students 17 years and older to serve as poll workers, and veterans through a “[Call to Duty](#)” initiative. Another program, “Heroes for Democracy,” encouraged businesses to offer employees a paid day off to work at the polls. The state also released a video [public service announcement](#), with former Republican Governor Bob Taft and Democratic U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown, which used humor between old foes and a bipartisan message to encourage people to work the polls.

Individual counties in Ohio also stepped up their local recruiting efforts. For example, in Cuyahoga County, the state’s most populous county, the County Council [voted](#) in August to allow county employees to receive paid leave in order to serve as poll workers. Franklin County implemented a “Champions of Democracy” [program](#) that recruited new poll workers from local businesses. Its “Champions” included seven of central Ohio’s 30 largest employers and four Fortune 500 companies. Hamilton County, Ohio, also instituted a new program called “[Partners](#)

[in Democracy](#)” to engage local businesses and agencies. The largest privately held business in Hamilton County was its inaugural corporate partner, and nine separate county government agencies also signed onto the effort. By October 30, Secretary of State Frank LaRose [announced](#) that a record 56,789 Ohioans were trained and ready to serve as poll workers. This far [surpassed](#) the minimum number required—37,057—as well as surpassing Secretary LaRose’s goal of 55,588.

Michigan [partnered](#) with the Detroit Pistons basketball team to increase civic engagement and inspire voter participation for both the August primary and the general election. The Pistons’ partnership included:

- Partnering with the Detroit City Clerk’s office and the Michigan Department of State to designate Henry Ford Detroit Pistons Performance Center as a voting “Satellite Center” for the general election, enabling people to register and vote on site.
- Coordinating the Pistons’ program to have Piston employees volunteer to work the polls in concert with the Detroit City Clerk’s office, for both the August 4 and November 3 elections.
- Partnering with the Michigan Secretary of State’s office on a series of PSA videos utilizing Pistons players, coaches, and personalities to educate voters about registering to vote by mail, as well as “How To” videos to ensure ballots are filled out correctly and returned properly.
- Building a voter registration page into the Pistons.com website that integrated directly with the Michigan Bureau of Elections, so that individuals could register to vote online and submit their applications to vote by mail.
- Hosting live voter registration and education events with nonpartisan community organizations which featured information on how to register for and complete and return ballots.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson also started an online “[Democracy MVP](#)” campaign to attract election workers to help process absentee ballots and perform other tasks. This campaign used YouTube videos and Twitter and Facebook posts to spread the word. Over [1,600](#) people applied to participate in the program within the first 10 days of the campaign’s launch. By November 3, these initiatives had helped recruit more than [30,000 election workers](#) across Michigan. Around 1,500 of these recruits were part of a “[reserve pool](#)” to be deployed across the state in the event of last-minute worker changes or shortages, and this pool was utilized when some poll workers were exposed to the coronavirus and had to quarantine on Election Day.

In Wake County, North Carolina, the Election Board [conducted](#) a mail campaign to implement its “Vote to Volunteer” Program. The board mailed a “Vote to Volunteer” buck slip to all registered voters at a cost of \$0.025 per slip, asking them to work the polls. Wake County also collaborated with the Wake County Revenue Department to include the buck slip in the revenue department’s annual tax revenue mailing, sent to each Wake County resident. By the end of September, Wake County had [doubled](#) the number of poll worker applicants necessary to sufficiently staff its precincts. The Wake County Board of Elections reported that, while they typically have five teenaged poll workers, in 2020, they had 300.

Some localities worked in close collaboration with local high schools and colleges to recruit additional poll workers. For example, Martin County, Florida, [developed](#) a “Work the Polls” video, which election officials then pushed out to various colleges to display on their websites and distribute to their students. The program coordinators [reached out](#) to various college professors, too, asking them to help recruit students. The effort involved sending emails and text messages to all eligible students, holding voter registration drives on school campuses, and visiting classrooms to present information and answer questions about working the polls.

Election officials in a few states worked with state bar associations to provide CLE credits for attorneys who agreed to serve as poll workers. Lawyers in [South Carolina](#), [Ohio](#), [Virginia](#), and [Indiana](#), for example, were allowed to put their hours worked as a poll worker towards CLE requirements.

Individual college administrations granted excused absences or course credit, or even [canceled classes](#) to increase civic participation and service. Several law schools, including [Stanford Law School](#) and [Northwestern Law School](#), canceled classes. The Political Science Department at the University of Delaware offered an independent study course in the fall that allowed students to [earn course credit](#) for working at the polls in November.

C. State-Nonprofit Partnerships

State-level nonprofits also played a major role in some places. For example, after Georgia’s June 9 primary election was plagued with long lines, major delays, equipment malfunctions, and a shortage of well-trained poll workers, the [ACLU of Georgia](#) launched a Poll Worker Recruitment Program in early July. The program collaborated with local election officials as well as Power the Polls and other civic organizations to ensure the November election would run smoothly. The program focused on recruiting younger Georgians, lawyers who understood the ins and outs of election law and administration, and tech-savvy Georgians to help keep the voting machines running. In addition to recruiting poll workers, the program assisted civic organizations in

adopting polling precincts. The ACLU of Georgia set out to recruit at least 1,000 poll workers in the state's four largest counties: Cobb, Gwinnett, Fulton, and DeKalb, and aimed to recruit 2,000 poll workers in total across the state. By November 3, the program had recruited over 2,700 poll workers, including over 1,500 in the four largest counties.

The ACLU of Georgia [recruited](#) over 300 lawyers to serve at the polls during the general election as special "On-Site Fulton County Deputy Registrars." One lawyer was stationed at each of the 255 polling sites in Fulton County, to cancel absentee ballots for voters who had requested them but instead wanted to legally vote in person on Election Day. This initiative removed the need for poll managers to call a central county office for absentee ballot cancellation, a process which caused significant wait times during the June 9 primary election. It also resulted in shortened wait times for voters and allowed the poll managers to focus on other necessary aspects of running their polling places.

In addition to its on-the-ground recruitment work, the ACLU of Georgia surveyed veteran poll workers to develop a [set of recommendations](#) for county election officials on how to resolve obstructions to the voting process. This effort resulted in the following six overarching recommendations:

1. Simplify the application process and adopt shorter shifts to encourage more people to become poll workers.
2. Organize training materials in an easily digestible format to increase awareness on the nuances of election procedure.
3. Implement dry runs and personnel/equipment contingency plans to preempt common Election Day challenges faced by poll workers.
4. Simplify the absentee ballot cancellation process to reduce wait times.
5. Expand channels for feedback from poll workers to allow for continuous improvement of the elections process.
6. Adopt CDC guidelines for protecting the health of poll workers and voters.

These recommendations included 17 targeted improvements, including adopting shorter shifts (both to relieve poll workers and to encourage more applicant to participate), scheduling a number of poll workers to be "floaters" to be available to travel to any location in need of additional assistance on Election Day, and ensuring poll workers are trained on the implementation of proper social distancing guidelines.

In West Virginia, many counties experienced poll workers [dropping out](#) at the last minute because of coronavirus fears during the primary election. In response, the secretary of state's office [mounted a campaign](#) to ensure that there would be at least 9,000 poll workers to serve at

1,700 precincts during the general election. The office partnered with the [United Way of West Virginia](#) for National Poll Worker Recruitment Day on September 1 to encourage registered voters to sign up to work the polls. The United Way assisted in the initiative by helping identify eligible citizens willing to serve as alternate poll workers. By September 7, Matt Gallagher, program coordinator for the secretary's office, [reported](#) that a sufficient number of volunteers had been recruited, as well as 1,000 alternates.

V. Results of Recruitment Efforts

Though some jurisdictions still faced poll worker shortages and staff challenges during the November 2020 election, the success of recruitment strategies mitigated the feared shortages.

Many localities experienced such a surge of volunteers they were able to hire more poll workers than in typical years. This was the case in Alexandria, Virginia, where election officials reported [doubling](#) the number of poll workers usually hired. Some counties experienced such a surge of volunteers that they had to turn people down. For example, Maricopa County, Arizona, [received](#) 20,000 requests to fill 1,800 poll worker positions. Milwaukee also easily met poll worker demand, despite a dire picture during the primaries; election officials closed the poll worker application two weeks before the election because they had [received](#) the necessary number—4,000 applications, enough to run 175 locations. In Maryland, there was enormous fear over the summer about an expected shortage, after thousands of poll workers dropped out during the primaries. However, Montgomery County, the state's most populated locality, saw [nearly double](#) the applicants it needed to fill the 4,300 spots. And after [massive delays](#) occurred for voters during the primary, Georgia saw huge poll worker volunteer numbers for the general election. In [Athens](#), one of the state's largest metropolitan areas, election officials reported a worker surplus, with a buffer of dozens of volunteers being placed "on call" in case hired workers got sick or backed out.

Precincts with sufficient volunteers were better equipped when faced with issues that required troubleshooting on Election Day. For example, a small misprint on about 13,000 ballots in Outagamie County, Wisconsin, required poll workers to [make a duplicate](#) of each misprinted ballot received by transferring all of the votes on the ballot submitted onto a new ballot. Before the election, Outagamie County Clerk Lori O'Bright [estimated](#) that this process would take about four minutes per ballot and would "slow things down." However, after the election, O'Bright [stated](#) that the precincts with the most misprinted ballots had enough poll workers to handle the workload, which prevented delays.

In other jurisdictions, however, poll worker challenges persisted. Erie County, Pennsylvania, [experienced delays](#) on Election Day because of last-minute poll worker cancellations. There were [reports](#) in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, of slow starts at polling stations because of “technical issues” or confusion among poll workers. In Newark, New Jersey, outside observers called for [more poll workers](#) in future elections, after a lack of signage caused confusion for voters at the polls. Additional problems in New Jersey were connected to the [delayed](#) polling place openings and incorrect information being [provided](#) by some of the poll workers to voters.

Overall, disruptions across the country were “isolated and sporadic,” [according to](#) Kristen Clarke, president of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. Secretaries of state in Michigan, Georgia, and Florida [echoed](#) the sentiment, citing calmness in the polling places and lack of security problems.

Another view of the results of these recruitment efforts came from the recruited poll workers themselves. After the election, Power the Polls sent a [survey](#) to its entire email list, asking those who signed up to share their experiences. Over 20,000 people responded, half of whom had served as poll workers during early voting or on Election Day. The vast majority of respondents had never served as a poll worker prior to the 2020 elections, and fewer than 3% indicated that they had regularly served as a poll worker in the past. While the survey showed that some states prepared and trained their volunteers better than others, and many states did not contact applicants until a week or just days before the general election, when asked “Would you be interested in serving as a poll worker in future elections?” 95% of all respondents, including those who did not serve in fall 2020, indicated they would be interested in serving again.

VI. Conclusion

From secretaries of state to national corporations and nonprofits, to college and high school students, the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the spring primaries spurred Americans into action to ensure that the democratic process ran smoothly in 2020. Because the vast majority of precincts had sufficient volunteers to serve as poll workers, voters had more conveniently located polling places, and fewer voting-related inconveniences than many expected at the beginning of the pandemic. These efforts contributed in no small part to the “[remarkable success](#)” of the 2020 election’s administration. Although the United States may not face these same circumstances again, the successful recruitment of a new pool of volunteers, including many young people, during the 2020 election cycle may pay dividends well into the future.