

# **The Front Lines of Democracy: Who Staffs Polling Places and Does it Matter?**

By

Bonnie E. Glaser  
Karin Mac Donald

Iris Hui

Bruce E. Cain

Election Administration Research Center (EARC)  
University of California, Berkeley

Contact us at <http://earc.berkeley.edu/about.php>

EARC Working Paper 0704  
October 2007

DRAFT – Please do not cite or quote without permission of authors!

## **ABSTRACT**

Almost every election in the United States is run with the assistance of non-professional volunteers that staff polling places. They number in the hundreds of thousands and are recruited and prepared for their jobs in various ways by local election administrators. But who exactly are these Election Day workers upon which our system relies so heavily? Anecdotal data suggests that poll workers are largely elderly, retired women that are uneasy with technology, and in election administration circles, the qualification to become a poll worker is often summarized as “having a pulse.” However, does it matter who they are or are there factors that can influence whether polling places run successfully independent of the background of who staffs them?

This paper evaluates data from a survey of 15,000 poll workers during California’s 2006 Primary Election. We find that the type and quality of training that individuals receive, along with the availability of adequate reference materials negates any effects in age and background. We conclude by extrapolating our results to make recommendations for more effective training, recruitment and retention of poll workers.

They are typically called poll workers, precinct officers, election judges (or some hybrid of those) and are commonly referred to as the ‘army of volunteers’ who staff polling places around the country each election day, working long hours for varying, but uniformly little pay. They are the guardians, facilitators, policing authorities, access-granters, and gatekeepers of the in-person voting process nationwide. They are the unsupervised links in the Election Day chain that makes no allowance for error.

Since the passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002<sup>1</sup>, there has been more attention paid to these workers, but the systematic study of them has lacked sorely. One objective of HAVA is to increase uniformity in election administration ranging from registration databases to poll worker training. Given the obvious importance of this ‘volunteer army,’ one might ask why there has not been more study of them. The answer is simple: they are extremely difficult to study because of the widely varying environments in which they operate and the lack of data available to study them. In 2004, there were over 6500 local election jurisdictions nationwide, almost all of them running their own recruitment and training, but they are not required to systematically collect and report basic demographics of their poll workers.

Nationwide surveys so-far have only collected the number of poll workers that worked in any one election, and the basic laws associated with their recruitment and training.

However, there are no hard statistics on the demographics of the poll worker workforce in the United States. What is known historically about poll workers is whether or not they represented political parties, a common practice until the turn of the last century

when reforms brought about the nonpartisan poll worker. Some jurisdictions still require that the political parties nominate individuals to become poll workers. (USEAC, 2005)

The most comprehensive government report on the characteristics of poll workers was done by the U.S. General Accounting Office<sup>2</sup> in 2001 which relied solely on anecdotal reports from local jurisdictions to describe the workforce. For example, “An election official in a small jurisdiction said that over 70 percent of their poll workers are over 65 years of age. Another election official reports that... ‘many of our inspectors are senior citizens, between the ages of 70 and 80-plus years...’ and ‘Several officials said that their election workforce was aging and they were having difficulty recruiting younger workers.’

To fully understand who poll workers are and the context in which they operate, long term and in-depth studies of single jurisdictions are being conducted in California. This research, however, is largely qualitative and still in its early stages, and thus does not lend itself to generalization at this time, because there are too many variables and few that are constant across or even within jurisdictions.

There is very little in the academic literature about poll workers due to the factors outlined above. One paper (Alvarez/Hall) discusses poll workers in the principal-agent paradigm and for nation-wide background data relies on the 2001 GAO report. Most of what is written about poll workers comes from news reports that cover them because the U.S. election system failed at one of the hundreds of thousands of polling places that are

staffed in each election.<sup>3</sup> They are talked about when voters report that they were discriminated against,<sup>4</sup> when voters were turned away in error,<sup>5</sup> when polling places don't function as they should. More recently, poll workers have made the news because there were not enough of them to staff polling sites<sup>6</sup>. They also made news when significant numbers of them did not report to work in one California County on Election Day<sup>7</sup>, and polling places remained closed for much of the morning, only to be opened by inexperienced workers who did not properly operate voting machines.

Kimball and Kropf (2006) use Lipsky's (1980) framework of street-level bureaucracy to make the argument that local election officials (LEOs), i.e. Registrars of Voters, County Clerks, etc. are responsible for actually applying rules and procedures. We concur with their opinion that LEOs play a large role in the implementation (or lack thereof) of federal, state and local laws. However, when it comes to in-person voting at the polling place, the poll worker is the ultimate decision making authority who decides who gets to vote, what ballot voters receive and whether needed assistance is provided. Poll workers are the ones who invent coping mechanisms to deal with uncertainties and work pressures, and in fact become the policy makers as they carry public policies out one polling place at a time. Poll workers then, really are the implementers of election laws at the polling place, and the street-level bureaucrats of election administration that Lipsky (1980) describes.

In this paper, we analyze data collected from poll workers about Election Day in the primary of 2006. First, we discuss the motivations for individuals to become poll

workers and how that differs across various occupation or occupational status categories. Then we create a model that takes these occupation categories, along with previous work experience and the level of responsibility assigned at the polling place, and analyze the experiences those groups report having at the polling place. Then we add various independent variables to explore whether different aspects of training and preparation are responsible for turning a bad work experience into a good one. Finally, we conclude by offering some concrete policy recommendations that situate the quantitative data from this study with the qualitative data collected over the past three years.

### **Data Collection & California Poll Worker Survey 2006**

The data for this paper come primarily from a survey of California poll workers during June 2006. We supplement the survey results with qualitative data from observations of trainings in twenty-seven counties over a period of three years, and participant observations of twenty-seven polling places on four different Election Days in five California counties.

The survey data were collected from election poll workers who worked at polling places throughout California during the Primary Election of June 6, 2006. This survey was jointly funded by the California Secretary of State's office and the Election Administration Research Center (EARC) at UC Berkeley, and conducted in collaboration with the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials (CACEO), the professional association of California's local election officials.

California's 58 counties had roughly 25,000 voting precincts in the 2006 Primary election that were staffed by approximately 100,000 poll workers. By law, California's precincts have to be staffed by a minimum of 3 poll workers, but some counties, depending on availability, will hire as many as 6 workers to fill special needs, usually to add workers with second language skills. On average, a precinct board consists of 4 members. In the 3 weeks before the election, EARC distributed over 55,000 surveys to 24 counties;<sup>8</sup> each county received enough surveys for each poll worker to complete. The survey instrument consisted of 32 questions, printed on a double sided 8 ½" x 11" sheet of paper.<sup>9</sup> A self-addressed postage-paid business reply envelope was stapled to each survey. Within three months after the election, EARC received back approximately 42 percent of the surveys state-wide. For smaller counties, all responses were coded and entered, and for larger counties, a random subset equaling 20% of returns. The dataset used for this paper consists of 15408 responses.<sup>10</sup>

The participating counties used a wide variety of voting technology. Some had scanners in their precincts, some used paper ballots that were centrally scanned, and others used touch screen or other DRE voting machines. To meet the HAVA accessibility requirement, some of the optical scan counties had ballot marking assistance devices and some used DRE machines, and two because of poor timing with certifications did not meet this requirement until the November 2006 General Election.

## Poll Worker Characteristics

As discussed above, there is little available data on poll worker characteristics. To measure some demographics of our sample, one survey question asked: “What do you do when you are not working as a poll worker?” The answers were grouped into twenty categories, and some respondents gave more than one answer (e.g. student and part-time sales clerk). Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the sample in terms of their first answer to this question in the sixteen major categories. The largest group by far is the group that began their answer to this question by stating they are ‘retired’ at 44% of sample. The group that reports ‘volunteer work’ as their main occupation might also include retirees who chose not to declare this on their survey. The percentage of workers who are not in active in the traditional labor force (students, homemakers, volunteers, unemployed and disabled), and might therefore have more flexible schedules combined to over 60%.

<Figure 1 here >

While the retired population is a major source of poll workers, the work force also included ten percent of stay-at-home parents and students. In California, the ability to hire high school seniors as poll workers has generally been a major help to the counties, although during this particular Election, high school seniors were mostly unavailable due to exams, graduation or vacation. Typically the high school student contingent alone would be more than five percent of the poll worker work force, statewide, and up to thirty percent or higher in some counties. Another major pool of poll workers in California is

government employees who are often paid their regular salaries in addition to the poll worker stipend when they work at the polls. A full ten percent of the poll workers in this Election were mostly county but also state and federal employees.

Retired individuals make up a large part of the poll worker work force, but there is an increasing concern among officials, the media, the public and even the workers themselves that in the age of voting machines and increasing complexity at the polling place, this group may not be the best choice. Reasons frequently mentioned include that retirees of advanced age may have a difficult time lasting through the long, intense day and may not be able to efficiently process large groups of voters who demand quick service. For example, one non-retired respondent said in our survey,

“Older poll workers had to be monitored to keep them from making mistakes. Inspector did not know how to open/close and did not help with those tasks. She also has glaucoma and could not read the combined voter index.”

Poll worker trainers have mentioned that some older workers that have been working at the polls for many years have a hard time adjusting to new procedures, equipment, and changes in the law, and tend to get stuck in a ‘rut’ doing the work the same way it has always been done. Many believe that new voting equipment deployed all over the nation is a challenge for older folks, and especially those who may not have used computers in their working career. At the very least the equipment is heavier and more cumbersome to collect, transport, set up, and dismantle. One retired respondent wrote on the survey,



‘Poll workers too old; machines too heavy. Have one able bodied man on each board; smaller classes - takes older folks longer to comprehend information.’

Clearly there seems to be somewhat of a bias against older, retired poll workers, but we do not know whether this bias is warranted. Do older and retired poll workers really perform less well than younger and non-retired workers?

## **Motivation to Work at the Polls**

A consequence of the Help America Vote Act’s requirements for changes in voting technology has been a growing complexity of the work of poll workers. In recent years, we have seen severe poll worker shortages as local election officials struggle to find enough people to staff the new high tech polling places. The poll worker shortage for the 2004 Presidential Election made national news.<sup>11</sup> In 2006, even more new voting equipment was rolled out as HAVA laws took effect. For the 2006 elections, both state primaries and the General Election on November 7<sup>th</sup>, various states and localities reported severe shortages, including Ohio, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, and especially California for its June 6 Primary.<sup>12</sup> While there were cases of major glitches which were unacceptable,<sup>13</sup> amazingly these elections did go forward. What can be learned from these elections about recruiting and retaining poll workers? Why do people volunteer to staff the polls and why do they return or not return for the next election? And answering this, how can we make staffing the polls on Election Day a more attractive experience?

<figure 2 here>

In answer to the open-ended question “why did you become a poll worker?” the answers fell into sixteen categories. For simplicity of analysis, we collapse the motivation variable into four possible values: service/duty, social benefits, time available, and material incentives.<sup>14</sup> Figure 2 shows the distribution of these motivations grouped into the four categories. The most common reason given for becoming a poll worker was “to help my community” “to help out” or “community service.” The next most common category referred to something about the democratic process, democracy, the election or electoral process. In some cases, it was to learn about, experience, or be part of the process. In other cases it was about safeguarding the process (especially with respect to the 2000 and 2004 election troubles), such as “I wanted to make sure the process was fair and unbiased” or “I felt it was important to support our voting system” or “I feel its important to facilitate the process” with reference at times to the perceived incompetence of current workers, such as “I believe we need more smart capable people working at the polls.” The third most common reason was simply given as “civic duty” or “civic responsibility,” with no further explanation. Another fairly common reason was that a person (friend, relative, or neighbor) “asked me to do it.”

While the rest of the reasons each took less than 10% of the total, they are also interesting. A substantial group of 1000 respondents reported that they work at the polls because they like it, and claim that it is fun or interesting or they ‘thought it would be

interesting.’ Another five percent expressed a social motive for working at the polls, in that they liked working with people, meeting people, or seeing neighbors. Slightly less than five percent admitted right off that they signed up to work for the small cash stipend they would receive. Another four percent responded to the last minute appeals for help by the county welfare offices, which they heard through news media or in letters from their local registrar. Several respondents claimed to have free time, usually specifically because they were retired or because they were unemployed. A small portion of respondents mentioned helping out their ‘country’ rather than ‘community’ and they were coded as patriots. Another very interesting repeated reason was “my mother always did it” or “my whole family has done it for years” and this was also categorized with comments such as “I started one year and just did it every election since.” A very few, mostly high school students, volunteered for election day service as part of a school project, for educational credit or for experience to put on a resume. Under one percent of respondents reported that they volunteer to work at the polls as part of their volunteer work for another organization, League of Women Voters for example, and/or to donate their pay to their preferred charity, and even a smaller few (47) stated that they were volunteering to assist voters with limited English proficiency (LEP).

TABLE 1 displays the frequency of the four types<sup>15</sup> for the whole sample, for retirees and for non retirees. Service/duty dominates the sample with more than half of respondents choosing some form of that. The social motives for working at the polls come from a respectable one quarter of the poll workers. Material motives and serving at the polls to pass the time are much smaller categories, but still come from hundreds of respondents.

Retired poll workers basically track the whole group with respect to service/duty and social motives. As we might expect, a slightly smaller portion of retired poll workers have material motives compared to the whole group, and slightly more simply use election work to ‘pass time.’ In fact, the category of “time available” by definition includes those who are unemployed or retired.

## **Poll Workers’ Experience of Election Day**

Poll workers in all jurisdictions are responsible for managing the polling place as a team and following the correct procedures for voting. In most polling places, they are also responsible for setting up equipment, showing voters how to use equipment, troubleshooting problems, dismantling equipment, and transmitting or transporting results. The experience of poll workers on Election Day can directly impact the experience of the voters at the polling places and the functioning of an election. Poll workers who had a good experience are more likely to return for the next Election and invite their friends to join them, which is evident from our assessment of motivations discussed in the previous section. Improving the overall satisfaction of poll workers with Election Day is central to ensuring a high quality electoral process.

This section explores the experience of the poll workers on Election Day. The analysis examines whether the background of the worker affects their satisfaction with Election Day processes, and how various aspects of training and preparation impact that same

level of satisfaction. The dependent variable is derived from the question, “In your opinion, how well did Election Day processes go at your polling place?” It measures each worker’s self-evaluation of polling place performance, which by definition includes his/her own performance and that of coworkers. The scale goes from 1 to 5 with 5 indicating the highest level of satisfaction.

The model tests the effects of four distinct dimensions of poll worker training measured by four groups of questions from the survey. All these questions also employ a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the highest level of approval or satisfaction with the specific aspect of training. The four aspects of training are reference materials provided, preparation for operating voting equipment, preparation for handling non-routine situations, and on-the-job instruction, and each is discussed below.

### ***Reference Materials***

Poll workers cannot learn everything they need to know during class on Election Day; therefore, they must rely on written materials to review procedures or look up questions they have on Election Day. The materials received at training which can be then reviewed at home and taken to the polling place for reference are critical to poll worker performance. We hypothesize that those who received adequate reference materials would feel better about their performance on Election Day.

### ***Operation & Demonstration of Voting Equipment***

A major part of election work is handling voting equipment, some of which has changed dramatically in recent years. Eight of the twenty-four counties surveyed had electronic voting machines on which most voters directly cast their votes. In accordance with state law, these machines all had printers which allowed the voter to verify his/her vote before casting it and served as a back-up paper trail for the county. Eleven other counties had optical scanners into which voters would place their paper ballots to be tallied. In most of these eleven counties, the poll workers set up one additional electronic machine for voters with disabilities. Five counties had no electronic equipment, but still had voting booths, ballot boxes, and in one case mechanical ballot marking devices. It is clear that understanding how to set-up, operate, demonstrate, and dismantle equipment is a major part of election work. For this analysis we focus on two specific aspects of training with respect to voting equipment. First is whether they feel the training has prepared them to operate voting equipment. Second is whether they feel the training has prepared them to demonstrate to voters how to use the voting equipment. Since these two aspects are essential to a smooth polling place operation, we predict that they will be positively associated with an overall satisfaction with Election Day processes.

### ***Handling Situations***

Although much of election work is routine, poll workers also find themselves faced with challenging situations and have to rely on their training, reference materials, and each other to make decisions and act appropriately. We examine poll workers sense of preparedness for handling a variety of non-routine circumstances. First, we asked

respondents whether they felt the training had prepared them to manage different voter situations and questions on Election Day. Second, we asked how effective the training was in preparing them to serve voters with disabilities, and third we asked them about the effectiveness of their training for serving voters with limited English proficiency.

### ***On-the-job Instruction***

For poll workers, especially those who are not in supervisory positions, class training is often supplemented by or substituted with on-the-job training. Inspectors, who are the managers of the group, may give brief reviews of the voter check-in process before the day begins and as they assign different tasks to each worker. Throughout the day inspectors show their workers how to do different tasks that arise, such as issuing provisional ballots. Experienced workers also take on this role at times, as do county election staff members who visit or are available on the phone. Many respondents to the survey commented on how critical this ‘on-site’ instruction was for them. For that reason, we also test whether on-site instruction on Election Day from other poll workers or election staff improved workers’ overall satisfaction with the process.

Based on the classification used in Figure 1, seven dummy variables were included for different occupation groups who are not active in the traditional full-time labor force to examine if their overall experience differs systematically from those active in the labor force. As discussed in the previous section, local election officials have been criticized for relying too heavily on older retired citizens who may not be the most competent workers available. Some advocate recruiting younger high school or college students to

replace the older retirees. This analysis examines whether retirees indeed are less competent than their younger counterparts, and controls for previous poll worker experience. The variable, *Previous Experience*, is a continuous variable (0=no previous experience; 1= between 1 to 5 times; 2=between 5 to 10 times; 3=between 11 to 15 times; 4=between 15 to 25 times; 5=more than 25 times). The survey does not have a question on age but we believe that is well proxied by previous election experience and retiree status. Lastly, a dummy variable, *Inspector*, is included to distinguish this group of special poll workers from the rest as they assume supervisory duties and more responsibility. Given that the data came from twenty-four counties and these counties employ a variety of voting machines as well as other administrative procedures, the model includes a fixed county effect. Table 2 reports the OLS regression outputs when the fixed county effect is included.<sup>16</sup>

<table 2 here>

Model 1 is the base model including the seven occupation groups, previous poll worker experience, and Election Day title (inspector or not). The reference category for the occupation groups is the respondents who are active in the traditional full-time labor force. Holding previous election experience constant, retirees are the only group that expresses less satisfaction with Election Day and that deficiency is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This result may lend preliminary support to the criticism that retirees who are older may be less prepared to perform compared to their younger counterparts.



Interestingly, Model 2 includes one additional variable---whether poll workers find the reference materials they received at training to be helpful on Election Day---and the difference between retirees and non-retirees disappears. In fact, we shall see that the retiree effect is not statistically significant in all the rest of the models we test. On the other hand, the coefficient for the reference materials is a large 0.54 and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. And by adding this one variable we get a large increase in the amount of variation explained, as the adjusted r-squared increases by 10 times to 0.33.

Model 3 adds to the base model (Model 1) the variables that capture training preparation for operating and assisting voters with voting equipment. Again, the difference between retirees and non-retirees is no longer significant and the coefficients of the additional variables are in fact significant at the .01 level. The positive effects of preparation to operate and demonstrate are almost identical (.21 and .20) but smaller than the effect of adequate reference materials.

Model 4 assesses the impact of the preparation for handling non-routine situations on Election Day satisfaction, by adding those three variables to the base model (Model 1). Both handling 'different voter situations and questions' and serving voters with disabilities have coefficients significant at the .01 level. Preparation for serving voters with limited English proficiency seems to have no effect. Poll worker confidence in handling various voter situations is more important (coefficient = .28) than confidence in

serving voters with disabilities (coefficient = .17) for overall approval of the Day's processes.

In another test (Model 5), the additional variable of satisfaction with on-site instruction provided by other election workers is added to the base model (Model 1). As with reference materials, the importance of this variable is statistically and substantively significant with a coefficient of 0.5; also like reference materials this variable provides a jump in the amount of variation explained as measured by the adjusted r-squared. This lends support to the hypothesis that on-site training and support are critical to the proper functioning of the polling place. Workers who missed training or just need their memories refreshed rely on other workers and election staff to brief them.

Finally, the full model using all the variables (Model 6) is tested and produces very interesting results. Nearly all the variables which were significant in the earlier models continue to be significant in the full model. In all the models, stay-at-home parents have a more positive rating of Election Day than other occupational groups. This is reassuring because that is a group that is potentially more available to work on Election Day than those in the traditional full-time workforce, and provides an alternative to the older retired pool. However, our results show that an alternative to retirees may not be needed. When we control for training-related variables the retiree effect disappears, but most of the training enhancements do make a difference. So while retirees feel slight less good about Election Day, that lack of satisfaction can be overcome with adequate training and support. The two most important components of training and support are adequate

reference materials and on-site instruction. Less important but still significant are training with respect to voting equipment, training on various voter situations, and training on serving voter's with disabilities.

## **Recommendations for Improving Poll Worker Recruitment, Retention, Experience, and Competence**

Survey respondents reported a variety of reasons for volunteering their time on Election Day, and strategies about recruitment and retention can be gleaned from an in-depth look at the answers. As discussed above, the most frequent reason mentioned was that they wanted to 'serve their community,' showing that concern for neighborhoods and the general spirit of community volunteerism is alive and well, at least when it comes to elections. This was followed by wanting to 'support the election process' or 'monitor the democratic process.' In fact, this reason was mentioned predominantly by first time workers, which indicates that concerns over Election Day glitches attract people to poll worker service who might otherwise not have considered it.

'Civic responsibility' and 'having been asked by a friend/relative or neighbor' were tied for third most frequent reason. Respondents likely ascribed many different meanings to the term 'civic duty' or 'civic responsibility' but the term nevertheless obviously has some appeal. The latter reason falls into a completely different category of 'social benefits' i.e. respondents are not driven by the idea that their participation matters for a greater cause, but rather they volunteer because they are recruited by, and were likely on

the same precinct board with, people they have a social or family relationship with. The next common reasons stated, 'its fun or I enjoy it' and 'I like meeting people and neighbors,' fall into the social category as well. While Election Day may be long and difficult with a lot of responsibilities, workers report gaining satisfaction from their accomplishment and end up calling the work 'fun.' They also share this task with others, see their friends and neighbors, and meet the hundreds of voters who all converge in one place over the day, thus reaping the social benefits of the job.

Some workers in the primary election were drawn by last minute appeals from state and county authorities to help stem the crisis that arose due to extreme poll worker shortages. One county reported that a press release was so effective that they suddenly had more volunteers than they needed.

While some form of duty or service or social benefit makes up over 75% of the motivations reported, there were also poll workers who worked for material reasons or simply because they had time. Material reasons mentioned include school credit (high school), experience for the resume, and more typically the poll worker stipend. Over 700 respondents admitted working because of the stipend which ranges from \$60 to \$140 depending on the level of responsibility and county, but many others also mentioned money as a motivating factor, or hinted at it in the open ended questions in a different section of the survey. Money was slightly more of a draw for those working for the first time, and it is likely that stipend increases would attract new workers and keep others coming back.

Appeals to duty or service would clearly bring in a more diverse group including those with traditional full-time employment, according to an analysis of motivation by occupation group. Duty or service was the attraction for 64-68% of the poll workers who were pulled away from jobs with fixed or long hours. And at least 60% of full-time volunteers and writers/artists were also drawn by a sense of duty. Recruitment with a focus on the social aspects of poll worker service would likely attract new workers from all occupation groups. While duty and social motives are not lost on students, material incentives are a significant reason to participate for this population. Making working at the polls a valuable part of both high school and college education, by garnering the support of teaching staff, especially in government classes, for this activity is a highly recommended policy objective.

Based on these findings, the recommendation is a multi-pronged approach to poll worker recruitment. Outreach to educate workers should be year-round and emphasize the importance of participating in the process and the need for competent Election Day staff, while also advertising the social benefits of the activity, using quotes from past workers about how and why they enjoy the day. This outreach combined with increasing the flexibility and benefits for students should help to increase the diversity of the poll worker workforce. In order to keep competent poll workers coming back, states and localities must do what they can to increase stipends to reflect the increasingly responsibilities and challenges of working at the polls.

In addition to the items discussed thus far, the survey included an open-ended question that asked respondents what might improve their overall experience as a poll worker. Their answers lead to the following recommendations for local election officials. Results were summarized that met one of the following three criteria: One, they were mentioned repeatedly by poll workers from multiple counties; Two, through observations and interviews with trainers and election administrators, they were found to have been implemented by at least one county, and were thus viable and practicable; Three, they are applicable more broadly to other jurisdictions. Alternatively, they are simply good, common sense suggestions that might be considered for implementation by election officials throughout the U.S., even though, due to variation in technology and other administrative factors, not all recommendations are relevant for all jurisdictions.

### ***Recruitment and Retention***

If state law permits that poll workers can work in any jurisdiction, not just in the one they are registered in, then all election offices should be made aware of this fact. While California election administrators were scrambling to hire enough workers to staff the election, potential poll workers reported being turned away in counties in which they work but do not reside, because election officials were uninformed about the law.

Split shifts should be offered whenever possible. The number one complaint about working the polls is that the hours are too long. Many election administrators shy away from offering split shifts due to the extra work additional poll workers create for them with respect to training and paying them. Nevertheless, the benefits of having enough

workers that are happily volunteering half of their days at the polls, and are fully alert and awake for the difficult closing procedures, by far outweighs the administrative obstacles the additional workforce presents. One solution to the payment issue is to encourage household partners or friends to divide the day amongst themselves and share the paycheck. Many poll workers claimed to know others who would work if they were allowed to split the day in half.

### ***Training and Testing***

All poll workers should be trained and tested after training to find out whether they comprehended the materials. Many jurisdictions train only some of their poll workers and many respondents who were not trained felt insecure and often overwhelmed by the process. Those that had to work with untrained poll workers said that the process was slowed down, they had to work harder, take on additional tasks, and shouldered too much responsibility. Our analysis above showed that differences in backgrounds disappeared when effective training was provided. Simple tests at the end of the session would aid in the assessment of whether poll workers need additional training to be able to perform their duties. This is especially true for the operation of voting equipment which every poll worker should handle during a formal training session, and demonstrate to others how to use. Poll workers were also shown to benefit greatly when they reported feeling confident that they could handle voter situations. This confidence arises from either having worked successfully before, having received on-the-job training and/or from formal training sessions provided by the election office.

Training and reference materials need reassessment. Many jurisdictions have reached the point where the entire training process and the materials that are used, should be recreated from scratch. It appears that most counties take the existing materials and training outlines and add to or subtract from them as new laws are implemented or as technology and procedures change. This piecemeal approach has led to overly complex, confusing and counter productive materials that often do not correspond to the training in terms of technology and process descriptions. Many poll workers have commented that this issue has contributed to the process becoming overwhelming and potentially error prone. Materials at the very least should be clearly labeled and indexed, and be checked for accuracy prior to distribution. Poll workers have reported that flow-charts and check-off lists are helpful. Poll workers also need a safety net with respect to Election Day assistance. They need to have access to a help line and/or their roving inspector via telephone. The help line has to be adequately staffed and reachable, especially during the early morning hours and the evening/closing hours. Help line access is becoming more important as policies become more complex, and additions of ‘voter-verified paper audit trail’ printers make the malfunctioning and unavailability of voting machines more likely.

## **Conclusion**

Any examination of the voting process must take in account the thousands of individuals who volunteer for a long day of intense team work, poll workers. However, poll workers are understudied and very little is known even about their basic demographic



characteristics. Therefore, surveys of poll workers in California were conducted to obtain a better understanding of their background, motivation to volunteer, and experience on Election Day. Retired individuals made up the largest proportion of poll workers in the survey sample. The next largest group was government employees which were also the largest category of workers from the traditional labor force. Among those not in the traditional labor force, stay-at-home parents and students of higher education make up 10% of the total. Motivations to do election work fall into the four broad categories of ‘service/duty,’ ‘social benefits,’ ‘available time,’ and ‘material incentives.’ Retirees tend to volunteer for all four reasons, but much less for material incentives compared to non-retirees, and more because they have available time compared to non-retirees.

The poll worker system relies heavily on retired individuals, but there is much concern that these workers, especially as they age, will be less able to perform well on Election Day. The multivariate analysis does in fact show that retirees are less confident about Election Day than their counterparts; however, that can be overcome by improving various aspects of training and preparation. Having adequate reference materials and on-site instruction and support goes the longest way to improving the poll workers’ evaluation of Election Day processes. Training to operate and demonstrate voting equipment and to handle various voter situations also helps. With these aspects of training addressed, retirees make just as confident poll workers as any others and overall the functioning of the polling place should improve. While we acknowledge the extensive variation in election administration across local jurisdictions, we believe these findings with regard to the importance of training and preparation can inform the policies

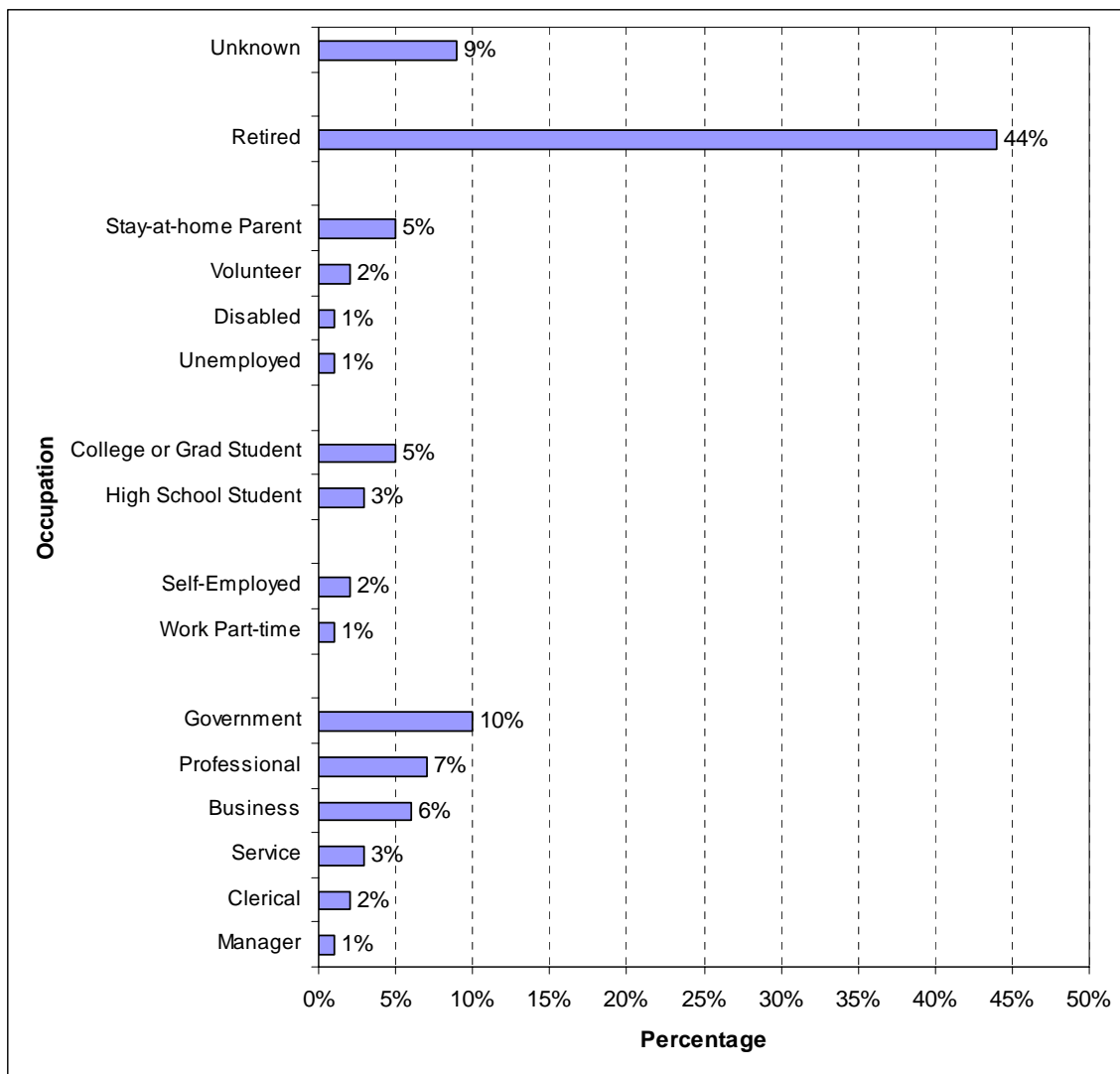
and programs of other states as well as California. Based on the survey responses, specific policy and program recommendations include a year-round recruitment strategy that targets specific groups and appeals to duty as well as the social benefits of working at the polls, efforts to increase pay and decrease the number of hours required, comprehensive testing and training of all poll workers, reorganization of reference materials, and providing adequate Election Day assistance.

## REFERENCES

- Alvarez, R. Michael and Thad E. Hall. 2006. Controlling democracy: the principal-agent problems in election administration. Policy Studies Journal 34.4 (Nov 2006): p491.
- Ansolabehere, S. 2004. Voting machines, race and equal protection. Election Law Journal 1(1): 61–70.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen and Charles Stewart III. 2005. “Residual Votes Attributable to Technology.” Journal of Politics 67(2): 365-389.
- Arrison, Sonia and Vince Vasquez. 2006. Upgrading America’s Ballot Box: The Rise of E-voting 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Pacific Research Institute. San Francisco, CA.
- Brady, Henry. 2004a. “Performance of Voting Systems on March 2, 2004.” UC DATA, Survey Research Center, UC Berkeley.
- 2004b. “Postponing the California Recall to Protect Voting Rights.” PS: Political Science & Politics 37(1):27-32.
- 2005. “American Elections and HAVA.” Presentation given at Carter Ford Commission on Federal Election Reform.
- 2005 “Let’s Not Forget About Accuracy.” Presentation at the Voting Systems Testing Summit, California Secretary of State, November 2005.
- Brady, Henry, Justin Buchler, Matt Jarvis, John McNulty. 2001. *Counting All the Votes: The Performance of Voting Technology in the United States*. Survey Research Center and Institute of Governmental Studies, UC Berkeley.
- Brady, Henry, and Iris Hui. 2006a. “Methods for Assessing Voting System Performance: Evaluating Los Angeles County’s InkaVote Using GIS.” Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Meeting, Chicago, IL.
- Brady, Henry, and Iris Hui. 2006b. “Is It Worth Going the Extra Mile to Improve Causal Inference? Understanding Voting in Los Angeles County.” Paper prepared for the Political Methodology Annual Meeting, Davis, CA.
- Glaser, Bonnie and Karin Mac Donald. 2007. “The Attraction of Working from 6 am to 9:30 pm for a Fraction of Minimum Wage: Poll Workers and Their Motivation to Serve,” prepared for presentation at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 2007
- Glaser, Bonnie and Karin Mac Donald, 2007. “Survey of Poll Workers in California – General Election November 7, 2006 Final Report on Eight California Counties,” May 1, 2007
- Glaser, Bonnie and Karin Mac Donald, “Voices from the Polling Place,” recommendations prepared for the California Secretary of State’s Office, April 1, 2007
- Kimball, David and Martha Kropf. 2005. “Ballot Design and Unrecorded Votes on Paper-based Ballots,” Public Opinion Quarterly 69.4 (Winter 2005): p508(22).
- Kimball, David C. and Martha Kropf. 2006. “The Street-Level Bureaucrats of Elections: Selection Methods for Local Election Officials” The Review of Policy Research 23.6 (Nov 2006): p1257
- Kimball, David C., Chris T. Owens, and Katherine M. Keeney. 2003. “Unrecorded Votes and Election Reform.” Spectrum: The Journal of State Government 76(1):34-37.

- Knack, Stephen and Martha Kropf. 2003. "Voided Ballots in the 1996 Presidential Election: A County-Level Analysis." Journal of Politics 65(3):881–898.
- Kropf, Martha and David Kimball, 2007. "Election Administration, Voting Equipment and Residual Votes Six Years After Florida." Paper prepared for presentation at the 2007 Midwest Political Science Association Meeting, April 15, 2007, Chicago, IL
- Lipsky, Michael. 1980. Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services. New York. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mac Donald, Karin and Bonnie Glaser. 2007. "From Locomotive to Bullet Train: Street-Level Implementation of E-Voting," prepared for presentation at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 2007
- Mac Donald, Karin and Bonnie Glaser. 2006. "The Why, How, What and When of Precinct Boards: Reactions from the Front Lines; A Survey of California Poll Workers in the Primary Election of 2006," prepared for the Annual Conference of California Association of Clerks and Election Officials (CACEO), July 25, 2006
- Moynihan, Donald P. and Carol L. Silva. 2005. "What Is the Future of Studying Elections? Making the Case for a New Approach." Policy Studies Journal. February 2005. Vol. 33, Iss. 1.
- The National Commission on Federal Election Reform, Century Foundation Press. 2001. "To Assure Pride and Confidence in the Electoral Process: The Final Report of The National Commission on Federal Election Reform," 7/1/2001
- Traugott, M. W., Hanmer, M., Park, W. , Herrnson, P. , Niemi, R., Conrad, F. and Bederson, B. 2005. "The Impact of Voting Systems on Residual Votes, Incomplete Ballots, and Other Measures of Voting Behavior." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC. September 2005
- United States Election Assistance Commission. 2005. "2004 Election Day Survey," September 2005.
- United States General Accounting Office. 2001. "Elections: Perspectives on Activities and Challenges Across the Nation," GAO-02-3. October 2001.

**Figure 1. Occupational Categories of Survey Sample**



**Figure 2: Motivations to Serve as Poll Workers**

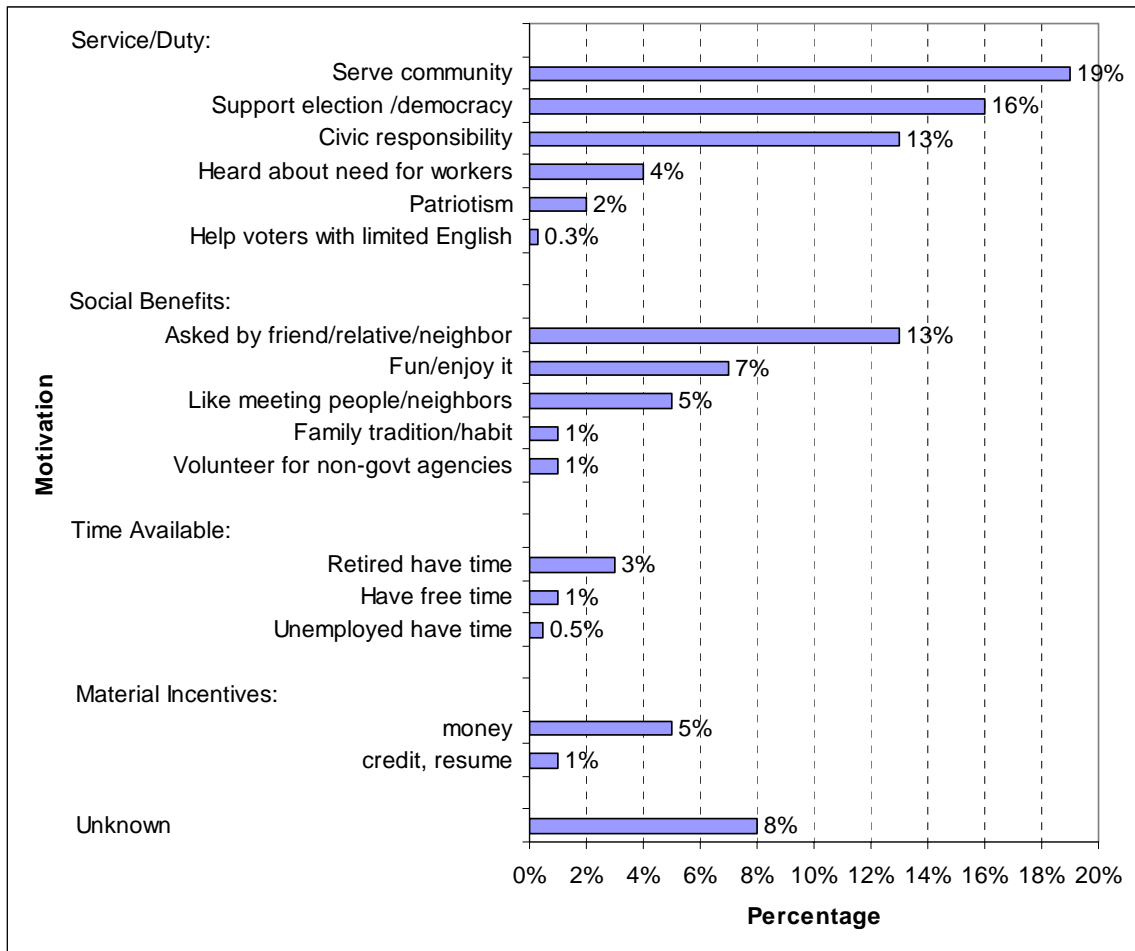


Table 1. Motivation Categories for Retiree vs Non-retirees

<b>Motivation</b>	<b>All Respondents</b>	<b>Retiree</b>	<b>Non-retiree</b>
Service/Duty	55 (%)	55(%)	54(%)
Social Benefits	27	27	27
Time Available	5	7	3
Material incentives	6	3	8
Unknown	8	7	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2. OLS Regressions with County Fixed Effect

Variables	Model					
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Intercept	4.10** (0.04)	1.98** (0.04)	2.60** (0.04)	2.55** (0.04)	2.12** (0.04)	1.22** (0.05)
Retiree	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
College/graduate student	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
High School student	0.21** (0.05)	0.15** (0.04)	0.09 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.05)
Stay-at-home Parent	0.12** (0.04)	0.08* (0.03)	0.11** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	0.11** (0.03)	0.08* (0.03)
Unemployed	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.00 (0.06)	0.03 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.06)
Disabled	0.09 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.08)	0.06 (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)	0.04 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)
Volunteer	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.05)
Previous election experience	0.02** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.03** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)
Inspector	0.05** (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.08** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
<b>Reference Material</b>						
Adequate reference materials		0.54** (0.01)				0.32** (0.01)
<b>Training: Machine Operation &amp; Demonstration</b>						
Operate voting equipment			0.21** (0.01)			0.05** (0.01)
Demonstrate equipment to voters			0.20** (0.01)			0.03* (0.01)
<b>Training: Handling Situation</b>						
Handle situations & questions				0.28** (0.01)		0.05** (0.01)
Serve voters with disabilities				0.17** (0.01)		0.03** (0.01)
Serve voters with limited English				0.01 (0.01)		-0.01* (0.01)
<b>Instruction during Election Day</b>						
Instruction from other workers/staff					0.50** (0.01)	0.27** (0.01)
Adj R-sq	0.03	0.33	0.21	0.23	0.31	0.43

\*\*p <0.01, \* <0.05

Standard errors are in parentheses.  
Coefficients for county fixed effects are not reported.



---

<sup>1</sup> "Help America Vote Act of 2002," (HAVA), Pub. L. No. 107-252, 116 Stat. 1666 (2002)

<sup>2</sup> This agency is now (since 2004) called the U.S. Government Accountability Office, but at the time of this report it was still the U.S. General Accounting Office.

<sup>3</sup> Any internet search using the terms: poll workers and problems will reveal hundreds of accounts of documented failures to administer elections properly. The Verified Voting Foundation and the Election Protection Coalition are non-profit organizations that also track poll worker problems as they are reported by voters. Groups like the League of Women Voters, NALEO, Maldef and APALC have also collected data on this topic, through self-reports by voters and polling place observations by volunteers on Election Day. For example: 'Poll worker jailed after allegedly choking voter: Dispute over whether man has to cast ballot in judicial race boils over in Ky.' can be found at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15611865/>

<sup>4</sup> 'Complaints Reveal Widespread Patterns Of Voting Discrimination Against New Yorkers With Disabilities,' [http://www.nysilc.org/News%20-%20backup\\_info/03-08-05\\_Voting%20Discrimination%20Report.htm](http://www.nysilc.org/News%20-%20backup_info/03-08-05_Voting%20Discrimination%20Report.htm); on racial discrimination see, [http://www.aaldef.org/docs/AALDEF\\_Sen\\_VRAreport\\_rls\\_2006.6.13.pdf](http://www.aaldef.org/docs/AALDEF_Sen_VRAreport_rls_2006.6.13.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=2352&type=100>

<sup>6</sup> 'Voters, brace for national poll worker shortage,'

<http://media.www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2004/11/01/WorldNation/Voters.Brace.For.National.Poll.Worker.Shortage-788111.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/06/19/BAG8QJGDBL1.DTL&type=printable>  
'ELECTION 2006: Touch-screen voting's steep learning curve - Rollout in 21 counties brings glitches'  
[http://votetrustusa.org/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=1483](http://votetrustusa.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1483)

<sup>8</sup> The counties that received surveys were: Alameda, Colusa, Contra Costa, Fresno, Humboldt, Kern, Lassen, Los Angeles, Mariposa, Marin, Monterey, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Solano, Tuolumne and Yolo.

<sup>9</sup> The survey instrument is available online at [earc.berkeley.edu](http://earc.berkeley.edu)

<sup>10</sup> A note on coding: For the open-ended questions, we developed the coding scheme using an emergent and reiterative method. With first glance at the hundreds of surveys we saw common language, for example, a frequent answer to "why did you become a poll worker?" was "civic duty" or "community service." We started with codes for these clearly ubiquitous answers and as coders progressed they suggested new common categories which were then assigned additional codes to use in data entry. For text that had already been entered without a code these were then recoded into the appropriate category. By the end of this process we had very few answers that didn't fall in to the given categories. This process took about three weeks with eight individuals coding and meeting every other day to discuss the codes.

<sup>11</sup> 'Voters, brace for national poll worker shortage,'

<http://media.www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2004/11/01/WorldNation/Voters.Brace.For.National.Poll.Worker.Shortage-788111.shtml>

<sup>12</sup> 'New Laws and Machines May Spell Voting Woes,' by Ian Urbina, October 19, 2006, New York Times:  
<http://travel2.nytimes.com/2006/10/19/us/politics/19voting.html?fta=y&pagewanted=all>

<sup>13</sup> 'Lines, malfunctions and untrained poll workers plague some states';

[http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2006/11/08/lines\\_malfunctions\\_and\\_untrained\\_poll\\_workers\\_plague\\_some\\_states/](http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2006/11/08/lines_malfunctions_and_untrained_poll_workers_plague_some_states/)

<sup>14</sup> The categories were recoded as follows. 'Service/Duty' includes civic duty, community service, patriotism, learn about/improve the process, heard about need for workers, and need for bilingual workers. 'Social Benefits' includes like working with people, asked by a friend, part of other volunteer work, fun or interesting, and family tradition. 'Material Incentives' includes money or school credit/resume. 'Time Available' includes having free time in general, because retired, or because unemployed.

<sup>15</sup> Cases for which the answer to this question is missing fall into the 'unknown' category which is 8% of the total.

<sup>16</sup> However, the coefficients for each county dummy variable are not reported.