

# LEO Views on Voter Education and Access

Perspectives from local election officials on their roles

NATALIE ADONA, FEBRUARY 2019

## TAKEAWAYS

- Compared to when they first started, most of the local election officials we surveyed say that it is easier today for people to register and vote, and easier for them as election officials to administer registration and voting processes.
- An overwhelming majority of local election officials enjoy educating voters and demonstrate a commitment to conducting voter education and outreach.
- Local election officials feel constrained by time and resources when planning for voter education and outreach activities and express the need for more funding.

Democracy Fund’s Elections Program provides robust support to several nonprofit organizations that work toward improving elections processes, as well as providing assistance to election officials themselves. Our research and investments show us time and again the important role of election administration and local election officials (LEOs) in particular, who handle the “nuts and bolts” of democracy to assure that elections in the United States are fair, free, and secure. Yet LEOs are not always part of national conversations about election reform and often do not have a seat at the table when important policy decisions are made.

In partnership with Reed College in Portland, Oregon, we launched the Democracy Fund-Reed College 2018 Survey of Local Election Officials (2018 LEO Survey). This project was born out of a desire to raise the voices of LEOs in national conversations about election reform, as well as to provide stakeholders within the elections community with opportunities to learn more about what LEOs think about the progress toward modernizing election administration. Encouraging conversations and collaboration with LEOs will lead to reforms that best serve the American electorate.

Even in an extraordinary federal election year with historically high turnout, over 1,000 LEOs from across the country took 10 minutes out of their busy schedules to answer the 2018 LEO Survey. This brief focuses primarily on the results from a battery of questions we asked about voter education and access, as well as some feedback from our open-ended question. I include a brief description of our respondents, their workload, and the 2018 survey methodology. I also offer some reaction to these results and questions for future research and discussion.

In this brief I find that, compared to when they first started, most of the local election officials we surveyed say that it is easier today for people to register and vote, and easier for them as election officials to administer registration and voting processes. An overwhelming majority of LEOs enjoy educating voters and demonstrate a commitment to conducting voter education and outreach. Key differences emerge in these data when broken down by jurisdiction size, but not when broken down by years of service. At the same time, LEOs feel constrained by time and resources when planning for voter education and outreach activities and express the need for more funding.

## **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE 2018 SURVEY OF LOCAL ELECTION OFFICIALS**

Local election officials are the people who administer elections in their jurisdiction. They work for cities, counties, and towns and are responsible for implementing the processes that allow voters to participate. Their function is primarily executive. LEOs must have expert knowledge of the federal, state, and local laws governing election processes. They create rules and procedures that must conform to those laws, and face serious consequences when problems occur. Their responsibilities can include ensuring that voters receive ballots, testing and maintaining voting equipment, conducting an election audit, training poll workers, and so much more. LEOs administer elections on limited budgets and are instrumental in shaping the voter experience.

Scholars estimate that there are as few as 4,500 and as many as 10,000 local elections jurisdictions in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This wide variation in what counts as an elections

jurisdiction makes it difficult to draw sweeping conclusions about LEOs as a group, and the data from our survey are no different. Rather, the data presented in this brief ought to be thought of as a snapshot of opinions amongst those who responded to the 2018 LEO Survey. We drew from a sample of 3,000 LEOs from all 50 states; 1,071 provided us with answers during the 6-month period we fielded the survey.<sup>a</sup> The questionnaire was respectfully short (given responsibilities during the midterm election cycle), but managed to include several topics:

- LEO attitudes about the ease of election administration and voting
- Length of service, experience running elections, and professionalization
- Changes in election administration since becoming LEOs
- Preparedness for the 2018 Election
- Evaluation of the costs and benefits of new election technology
- Cybersecurity measures implemented in their jurisdiction
- Demographics (age, educational level, race, gender, income)

Many of the survey questions build on prior work conducted in the early 2000s, after the Help America Vote Act was implemented.<sup>2</sup> As the survey was being developed, we found it important to create new questions to capture LEO opinions about more recent efforts to modernize election processes, especially in light of the recommendations set forth in the report by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration and recent public discussion about online voter registration and automatic voter registration. We will release an analysis of the full survey results ahead of the next federal election.

This brief focuses primarily on the results from a battery of questions we asked about voter education and access and includes relevant responses to our open-ended question about improving elections. As elections and voting stakeholders begin to plan for the next federal election cycle, these data can provide some much-needed insight into the role of local-level administration. This may also serve as a starting point for potential partnerships between LEOs and others seeking to engage the electorate (or in some cases, a deepening of existing partnerships).

## 2018 SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The respondents to the 2018 LEO Survey serve over 81 million voters. Over 25 percent of respondents administer elections in large jurisdictions,<sup>3</sup> 62 percent hail from medium sized jurisdictions, and 12 percent serve small jurisdictions. Our pool of respondents is mostly female (74 percent), white (88 percent), between 50-64 years of age (52 percent), and make \$50,000 or more annually (54 percent). Many have a college education (33 percent), and some hold graduate degrees (13 percent). Most have significant experience: about 40 percent have served as election officials for 5-14 years, and 41 percent have served 15 or more years. Over 65 percent report that they are members of a state professional association, and about 24 percent are members of regional associations.

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a More about the 2018 LEO Survey methodology can be found near the end of this brief.

These results are strikingly similar to results reported by the Congressional Research Service in 2011, which also found that America's election officials are not typical of the average local governmental workforce.

*"According to the survey results, the typical LEO is a white woman between 50 and 60 years old who is a high school graduate. She was elected to her current office, works full-time in election administration, has been in the profession for about 10 years, and earns under \$60,000 per year. She belongs to a state-level professional organization but not a national one, and she believes that her training as an election official has been good to excellent."*<sup>4</sup>

To learn more about their professional responsibilities, we asked LEOs how much of their time is dedicated to elections. There is substantial workload variation amongst respondents, with many responsible for non-election related tasks.

- "Election-related matters constitute all or almost all of my workload." (33 percent)
- "Election-related matters constitute the majority of my workload, but I have other duties not related to elections as well." (26 percent)
- "Election-related matters constitute less than half of my workload." (40 percent)

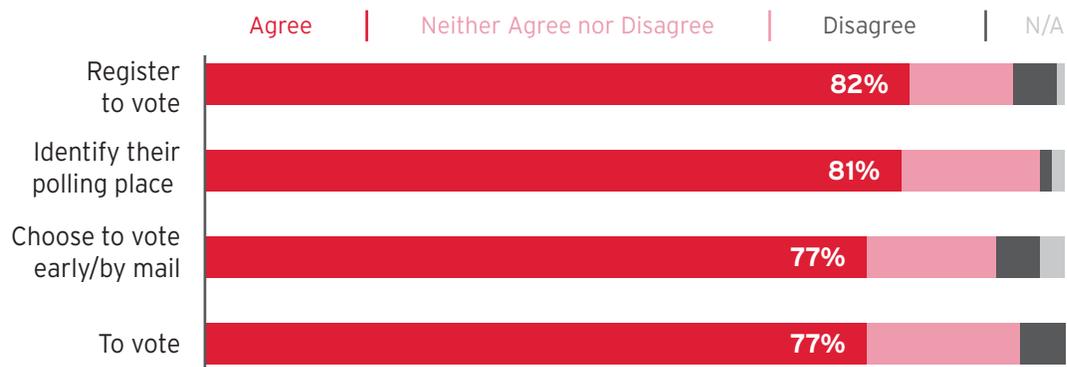
LEOs from small jurisdictions are more likely to have election related matters constitute less than half their workload (82 percent) compared to those from medium (44 percent) and large (12 percent) jurisdictions. Conversely, LEOs from large jurisdictions are more likely to have election related matters constitute all or almost all their workload (64 percent) compared to those working in medium (27 percent) and small (2 percent) jurisdictions. For those with varied workloads, these essential, non-election related tasks could include maintaining vital records, business records, and court filings. These data provide a strong starting point for better understanding the weight of responsibilities that LEOs must balance in every election, and what ways we can provide them with much needed support.

## **PERCEPTIONS ABOUT VOTER ENGAGEMENT AND ACCESS IN LOCAL ELECTION ADMINISTRATION**

Americans rely on LEOs to educate them about elections and help shape their voter experience. When asked about their main sources of basic election information, for example, public opinion surveys have shown that people rely heavily on the local election website to get information about registration deadlines and (to a lesser extent) candidate information.<sup>5</sup> Though we have several years' worth of public opinion data about elections, we did not have any information on how election officials think the public's experience with elections and voting has changed over time. Given the number of years most election officials serve and their proximity to voters, LEO insights on voter engagement and access are of particular importance. We asked a series of questions about whether LEOs agree or disagree that registration and voting has gotten easier or harder – both for voters and for administrators.

The majority of LEOs from our survey agree that, since they first started administering elections, registration and voting has gotten easier for voters. Eighty-two percent either “somewhat” or “strongly agree” with the statement, “Compared to when I started, it is easier today for voters...to register to vote.” Nearly as many believe that it is easier for voters to find their polling place. Seventy-seven percent believe that it is easier for voters to choose to vote early in person or by mail. About as many also believe that it is easier for voters to vote, regardless of the mode of voting.

**The vast majority of local election officials report it is now easier than when they started for voters to:**



These data also show that LEOs in larger jurisdictions are far more likely to think that voting has become easier. For example, 64 percent of LEOs from large jurisdictions “strongly agree” that registration has become easier for voters compared to 37 percent of their peers from small jurisdictions. This pattern of differences between large and small jurisdictions emerged in all questions that ask about the ease of voting. Our survey does not show that these differences are due to different experience levels – there is not a noticeable amount of variation when data are broken down by years of service.

We also asked LEOs about the ease or difficulty of election administration over their tenure. Most LEOs believe that election administration has become easier, though to a lesser extent when compared to the questions about ease of registration and voting. Seventy-one percent either “somewhat” or “strongly agree” with the statement, “Compared to when I started, it is easier today for election officials...to get voters registered.” Almost 59 percent either “somewhat” or “strongly agree” that administering pre-Election Day voting has gotten easier since they first started, and 61 percent answered the same with respect to administering Election Day voting. Over 60 percent either “somewhat” or “strongly agree” that certifying election results has gotten easier since they first started. Again, there are noticeable differences between those from different sized jurisdictions. For example, 45 percent of LEOs from large jurisdictions “strongly agree” that that it is easier today for them to get voters registered than when they first started, compared to 22 percent of LEOs from small jurisdictions. It is also worth noting once again that there is no clear pattern of variation when the data are broken down by years of LEO experience.

These results highlight an important theme that emerged in our survey – the attitudes, experiences, and even demographic profile of LEOs vary in significant ways by size of

jurisdiction. Just as we must be careful about making “one-size-fits-all” conclusions about elections across states, we also must avoid drawing hasty conclusions about the LEOs who administer elections in large, medium, and small jurisdictions, even within states. Size of jurisdictions also matters for the voter experience, and policy reforms and changes in states should take survey results like these into account.

## OPINIONS OF VOTER EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Democracy Fund promotes “voter-centric election administration” – that is, programs and investments ensuring that election processes are geared toward cultivating a positive voter experience. Examples of voter-centric election administration could include:

- LEOs creating and distributing voter education and outreach materials,
- Partnerships between LEOs and local organizations to help address specific voter needs,
- Ensuring that election processes at the local level are secure so that every ballot can be counted to the fullest extent of the law, and
- Establishing and maintaining a voter centric organizational culture in local election offices and departments.

The LEOs we surveyed overwhelmingly express voter-centric attitudes and endorse statements that value voter education and outreach. However, they also identify resource constraints as a major limitation on their ability to engage and educate voters and assure a positive voter experience.

Ninety percent of our survey respondents “strongly” or “somewhat agree” that they enjoy educating citizens about voting rules and procedures. Eighty-two percent “strongly” or “somewhat agree” that LEOs “should consider it part of their responsibilities to work on voter education and satisfaction.” Sixty-three percent “strongly” or “somewhat agree” that lack of citizen knowledge about voting rules can cause significant problems when people go to vote. Only 17 percent “strongly” or “somewhat agree” that their primary responsibility is to conduct the election, and not worry about voter satisfaction.

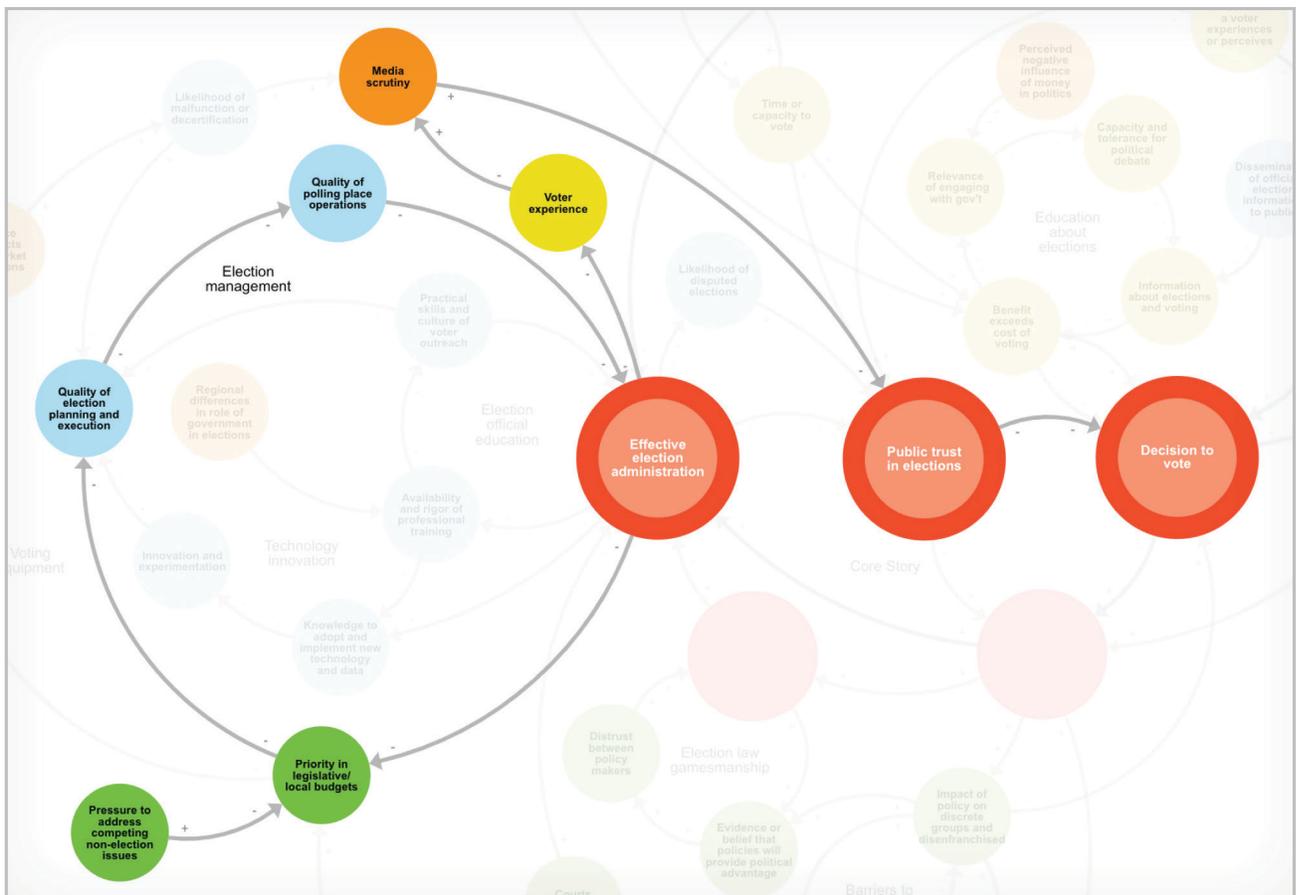
**90 percent of LEOs enjoy educating voters about voting rules — but only 35 percent say they have the time and resources to do it.**

Again, it is important to note some variation of responses when data are broken down by jurisdiction size. LEOs from large jurisdictions are more likely to strongly agree with the statement that they enjoy educating voters (78 percent) compared to LEOs in medium (67 percent) and small jurisdictions (29 percent), although those from small jurisdictions do “somewhat agree” with the same statement (rather than actively disagree). LEOs from large and medium jurisdictions are more likely to “strongly agree” with the statement “Local election officials should consider it part of their responsibilities to work on voter education and voter satisfaction,” and to

“strongly disagree” with the statement, “The primary responsibility of local election officials is to conduct the election, not worry about voter education or voter satisfaction.” Few LEOs from smaller jurisdictions actively rejected the voter-centric positions, yet they are less likely to provide a strong endorsement. It is encouraging to see substantial agreement about the importance of voter education and outreach within the LEO community.

Though LEOs we surveyed clearly hold voter-centric attitudes, substantial numbers also feel constrained by time or resources to work on educating voters, along with their responsibilities to conduct the election. Only 35 percent “strongly” or “somewhat agree” that they have the time and resources to educate voters, along with conducting the election. Compared to their peers from bigger jurisdictions, LEOs from smaller jurisdictions are more likely to “strongly disagree” that they have the time and resources to work on educating voters.

The need for more resources in election administration is not surprising, and has been recognized as a major impediment to election reform at all levels of government. Resource scarcity was a common theme as Democracy Fund constructed the Election Administration and Voting system map, and plays a critical role in improving election management and the voter experience.



It also emerged as a pain point for LEOs in our open-ended responses. We included an open-ended question to provide a chance for LEOs to express their opinions on how to improve elections, so that we would not lose some important details not specifically called out in the questionnaire. We asked LEOs, “If there is one change you could make that would help you run more efficient, secure, and fair elections in your jurisdiction, what would that be?” Some of the most compelling answers, typifying many of the open-ended responses, include:

*“A larger departmental budget with monies geared toward voter education.”*

*“More funding to educate voters on the election process”*

*“Money for the right equipment and voter training”*

*“Additional staff for voter outreach education”*

*“Grants for outreach.”*

*“More staff to help with training and education to both voters and election workers”*

*“Hire additional staff to focus on educating the public, especially school age children.”*

*“Simply put, it is a funding issue. If you want voter education & reach out that’s funding. If you want more early vote centers that’s money. If you want shorter lines at the polls... that’s money. If you want equipment you can count on that’s money... If you want to continue to stay up to date and educated that’s money! It all comes back to funding for me!”*

The calls from LEOs for more resources include money for new equipment, additional staff or poll workers, and additional training for staff and poll workers. Many also identify a general lack of communication and coordination between local, state, and federal government, and express a desire for support and understanding of the local election process. Because of the direct relationship between local election administration and the voter experience, these answers offer some critical feedback for the election community.

## Conclusion

At least two key questions for future research emerge from these findings. First, why do we see these differences in answers to our voter education and outreach questions by jurisdiction size, but do not see similar patterns of difference when it comes to years on the job? One possible answer might relate back to the workload question. Could it be that LEOs in the small jurisdictions we surveyed are also juggling several highly important, non-election related responsibilities? If so, to what extent did that affect their responses to our survey?

Second, to what extent do these results reflect opportunities for collaboration between LEOs and the advocacy community? Leaders of advocacy groups and LEOs both express a desire to connect with voters and to educate them about the election process. Both groups are also constrained by resources, which affects their ability to maximize the effectiveness of their voter outreach efforts. To what extent are LEOs and advocacy organizations working together to educate voters? What are the successes of these collaborative efforts, and where is there need for improvement?

The Elections Program team looks forward to further exploring these and other questions as we continue to dig into the Democracy Fund-Reed College 2018 Survey of Local Election Officials. We look forward to sharing more results from this survey, with the hope that doing so helps give LEOs a voice in the conversations around election administration and reform. We also welcome feedback from the community and encourage questions. Please direct questions and comments to [nadona@democracyfund.org](mailto:nadona@democracyfund.org).

## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The Democracy Fund-Reed College 2018 Survey of Local Election Officials was developed and administered by the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College from May 7, 2018 through August 31, 2018. Email invitations were sent to a random sample of 3,000 local election officials. The sample was drawn proportional to the population of registered voters in each jurisdiction, obtained from the Election Administration and Voting Survey, a collection of data about election administration maintained by the US Election Assistance Commission. Contact information for local election officials was drawn from a comprehensive database maintained by the US Vote Foundation.

Electronic versions of the survey were initially sent out via Qualtrics; paper versions of the survey were developed in June and then sent to the sample. A total of 1,071 local election officials sent in answers online and on paper. The opinion survey was timed at 10 minutes and covers questions on several topics, including elections modernization, cybersecurity, professionalization, and voter engagement. Survey responses are confidential, with results shared only in the aggregate.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalie Adona is a senior research and learning associate at the Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation working to ensure that our political system is able to withstand new challenges and deliver on its promise to the American people. Bringing extensive expertise in election administration, Natalie manages research projects for the Elections Program. For more information, please visit <https://www.democracyfund.org>.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For a comprehensive discussion, see Evan Crawford, Paul Gronke, and Paul Manson. "Surveying Local Election Officials in the United States: Methodological Considerations." Presented at the Southern Political Science Association in Austin, Texas, January 19, 2019. Paper available on request.
- 2 See, e.g., "How Local Election Officials View Election Reform: The Results From Three National Surveys." Congressional Research Service. March 4, 2011.
- 3 For this brief I have used the Kimball-Baybeck definitions of jurisdiction size. Small jurisdictions refer to geographic regions that contain less than 1,000 registered voters; medium sized jurisdictions contain between 1,000-50,000 registered voters; and large jurisdictions contain more than 50,000 registered voters. See David C. Kimball and Brady Baybeck. "Are All Jurisdictions Equal? Size Disparity in Election Administration." *Election Law Journal* 12, no. 2: 2013.
- 4 See endnote 2.
- 5 Natalie Adona and Paul Gronke. "Understanding the Voter Experience: The Public's View of Election Administration and Reform." The Democracy Fund. October 2018. <https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/understanding-the-voter-experience-the-publics-view-of-elections>.