

From Poll Workers to Defenders: Student Poll Workers as Catalysts for Change?

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Abstract: Assaults impinging the American electoral system's integrity – ranging from outright falsehoods about election processes to unfounded claims of voter fraud – have grown significantly since the 2020 presidential election. While largely unfounded, these impacts have caused significant declines in Americans' faith in their elections, election workers and administrators, and trust in electoral outcomes. Armed with this context, this paper details the author's efforts – as a long-time election administrator – to engage college students into the electoral process. This effort started during the 2020 presidential election and resulted in over 50 students being trained and ultimately serving as poll workers, culminating in the creation of a university-wide poll worker recruitment program. Additionally, the paper details an unexpected, but extremely welcomed, side effect of the poll worker recruitment program: students who serve as election inspectors strongly reject allegations of voter fraud and election integrity issues compared to students who did not volunteer at the polls.

As a result of these experiences, the paper discusses larger lessons learned from student feedback, highlights the logistical challenges associated with integrating the program into the curriculum and larger university civic sphere, and suggestions on liaising with local election administrators and officials. The paper concludes with thoughts on future extensions to the poll worker program and research plans for empirical testing of how working the polls impacts one's confidence in American elections.

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Student Poll Workers as Catalysts for Change?

Assaults impinging the American electoral system's integrity – ranging from outright falsehoods about election processes to unfounded claims of voter fraud – have grown significantly since the 2020 presidential election. While largely unfounded, the impacts of these accusations are only beginning to be studied by scholars. Among these impacts are significant declines in Americans' faith in their elections, election workers and administrators, and trust in electoral outcomes. These declines mirror longstanding, steep declines in citizens' social and political trust (for a recent review of public opinion data showcasing these declines, see Deane 2024 and Rainie, Keeter, and Perrin 2019). In short, America faces a legitimacy crisis concerning its elections.

The recent election of Donald Trump to a second, non-consecutive term highlights additional concerns regarding Americans' views on elections. The Pew Research Center (2024) notes that overall levels of trust in election outcomes and administration recovered in the post-November 5, 2024, period to their pre-2020 levels, with 88 percent of voters saying that the elections were somewhat well or very well administered. Large majorities of voters also believe that their votes counted in the 2024 elections, both in-person (90 percent) and those voting absentee/mail-in (75 percent). Voters supporting Republican candidates saw the most significant swings from 2020, while Democrats saw prominent declines in 2024 compared to previous, recent elections (although a large majority of Democrats continue to express trust in election administration, outcomes, and their votes being counted compared to Republicans).¹ These data suggest that an individual's views on election integrity correlate with their preferred partisan candidate winning the election, a troubling observation in an era of hyper-partisan acrimony.

¹ Full report available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/12/04/voters-broadly-positive-about-how-elections-were-conducted-in-sharp-contrast-to-2020/> (accessed January 25, 2025).

Armed with this context, this paper does two things: First, the paper details the author's efforts – as a long-time election worker himself – to engage college students into the electoral process. This effort started during the 2020 presidential election and resulted in over 50 students being trained and serving as election inspectors. Given that election's unique difficulties, the paper discusses the larger lessons learned for successfully integrating students into the polls as well as creating a larger university-wide poll worker recruitment program, placing students in formal election polls but also assisting with pre-election administration duties (e.g., processing absentee voter applications, absentee ballot processing, etc.) and post-election auditing and certifying.

Second, the paper builds upon an unexpected, but extremely welcomed, side effect of the poll worker recruitment program: students who serve as election inspectors were far more likely to reject allegations of voter fraud and election integrity issues than their non-election worker peers. Indeed, many of these election worker students became ferocious defenders in class discussions defending the integrity of the November 2020 elections, often against co-partisans. While anecdotal, student feedback from this 2020 and subsequent cohorts – which hued Republican and conservative in orientation – indicated that while they supported Donald Trump at the ballot box, they found Trump's claims of election irregularities difficult to accept. As a result, the paper argues that instructors and universities should strive to integrate their students into the electoral process directly, while also calling for a more systematic assessment of such experiential experiences on students' views on election integrity.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, it briefly reviews the literature on the relationship between election integrity and engagement in the electoral process, specifically concerning poll workers. Next, it reviews the poll worker program created by the author in 2020 and more fully developed over the subsequent elections. The paper then notes lessons learned from student feedback, highlights logistical challenges associated with integrating the program into the

curriculum and larger university civic sphere, and suggestions on liaising with local election administrators and officials. The paper then concludes with thoughts on future extensions to the program and research plans.

Poll Workers, Election Integrity, and Democratic Satisfaction

While much literature has examined the role of electoral engagement on an individual's civic orientations and democratic capacity, there is a smaller literature on the relationship between working elections and beliefs on election integrity (Jones and Stein 2021). Poll workers, or persons tasked with executing election laws and procedures in a voting precinct, serve a dual role as guardians of electoral integrity and facilitators of voter engagement.² As such, the growing literature on poll workers finds that poll workers influence their fellow citizens as well as exhibit qualities that set them apart from non-poll workers.

Research has found a positive relationship between poll workers' behaviors and views on electoral integrity and democratic satisfaction, especially for non-poll worker voters. Studies have found a causal link between poll worker efficiency and accuracy and voters' democratic satisfaction and confidence in the election process (Claassen et al., 2008; Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009; Hall and Stewart 2013). This is especially true given that poll workers do have discretion when implementing election laws (Atkeson et al., 2014), and such discretion directly impacts voters' experiences and perceptions about electoral integrity (Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009; Hall and Stewart 2013). This is also true across modes of election (in-person, early voting, absentee) and how well poll workers are perceived by voters as doing a "good" job (Atkeson

² Election workers go by many formal names that vary jurisdiction-to-jurisdiction, with "poll workers" serving as the common, informal name for individuals who serve as mostly temporary and voluntary election workers to assist formal, full-time, and (semi)permanent election administrators (i.e., elected officials and/or formal bureaucrats responsible for running elections). In the author's home state of Michigan, poll workers are legally referred to as "election inspectors."

et al., 2014; Claassen et al., 2008; Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009; Hall and Stewart 2013). For example, several studies have found empirical support for better outcomes related to poll workers and voter satisfaction when jurisdictions utilize voting centers for in-person and early voting, bolstering the efficiency of voting operations and keeping costs reasonable (Doyle 2008; Folz 2014; Fullmer 2015; Jones and Stein 2021). Such centers also allow a more equitable and sufficient allocation of resources, including properly trained poll workers, minimizing adverse effects associated with poorly trained and overtaxed election workers who make mistakes, negatively impacting voters' experiences (Stein and Vonnahme 2012; 2014). Meantime, Hall and Stewart (2013) find that while the descriptive representativeness of the poll worker (see below) generally does not factor into a voters' evaluation of the poll worker, the mode of election (e.g., early voting versus Election Day) may.

As such, the literature highlights how overlooking recruitment and training of poll workers can detrimentally affect voter confidence, especially in terms of elections producing fair outcomes and confidence that their ballots are accurately counted (Claassen et al., 2008; Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009). Poll worker recruitment in the US varies by state and often within states by municipal jurisdiction. Election administrators spend considerable time and fiscal resources in recruiting workers, training them, and ultimately retaining them for future elections (Alvarez, Atkeson, and Hall 2007; Burden and Milyo 2015; Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn 2012; Glaser et al., 2007). As Burden and Milyo (2015) note, approximately half of American election jurisdictions have difficulty in finding sufficient numbers of poll workers, a burden that, ironically, often increases as states liberalize their election laws and expand voting opportunities. Recruitment problems are more acute in urban areas, jurisdictions with high registration rates, and those employing partisan requirements for poll worker identification (Burden and Milyo 2015).

Surveys regarding poll workers have often noted, in addition to recruitment challenges, issues concerning whether they possess appropriate skills and knowledge to administer elections, the effectiveness of training efforts by election administrators (Alvarez, Atkeson, and Hall 2007; Burden and Milyo 2015; Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn 2012; Glaser et al., 2007), and the unrepresentative nature of poll workers themselves (Burden and Milyo 2015; King and Barnes 2019). Indeed, many studies note that poll workers are often undertrained, perceived by voters as being ill-prepared, overworked, and/or ignorant of relevant electoral processes, and often fault the lack of consistent and effective training by election administrators that leads to significant and sometimes illegal actions (Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn 2012; Glaser et al., 2007; Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009). These challenges negatively impact voters' perceptions of the electoral process. Moreover, the typical poll worker is female, white, older than average, and a college degree holder (Burden and Milyo 2015), which may negatively impact voters' perceptions of election integrity (King and Barnes 2019) given the history of voter disenfranchisement along racial, ethnic, and gender lines (although see Hall and Stewart 2013). Poor training may compound this issue, too, as an error caused by insufficient training may be perceived as facially motivated by racial, ethnic, and/or gender (Atkeson et al., 2010; Barreto, Cohen-Marks, and Woods 2009; Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn 2012).

Beyond the impact on voters, the experience of working in the polls may also impact a poll worker's own democratic orientations. Clark and James (2021) argue that poll workers express higher levels of democratic satisfaction than the average voter, gained through their volunteering service at the polls. Additional studies have found that poll workers exhibit greater degrees of civic mindedness, civic motivation, and public spiritedness directed towards community engagement (Barsky 2024; Glaser et al., 2007; McAuliffe 2009). As Hostetter (2020) describes, poll workers work long hours for relatively low pay, requiring poll workers to possess a strong sense of civic duty,

although pay and other material motivations do counterbalance the purposive and solidary motivations (Barsky 2024; Clark and James 2021).³

Finally, the literature also suggests that there is a connection between a voter's partisan affiliation, voting for the winning candidate, and confidence in the electoral system. In sum, those whose candidates have won are more confident in the electoral process and the poll workers they encounter, while Democrats (prior to 2008) were less confident than Republicans (for reviews, see Hall 2009 and Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009). Recent public opinion polling also suggests a partisan effect, albeit one that has shifted to Republicans post-2020 expressing far lower confidence than Democrats, rebounding post-November 2024, although Democrats now express lower confidence than in 2020 and 2022.⁴ Such a partisan impact may also impact voters' views of government (trust in government) more generally (see, e.g., Price and Romantan 2004).

Given these findings, it is likely that working as a poll worker may also have impacts on one's confidence in and support for the electoral system. While poll workers themselves may possess a greater sense of civic duty, which is reinforced through their volunteering, a negative experience working the polls may decrease their confidence in the electoral system's integrity. A poll worker who witnesses firsthand dysfunction or otherwise feels unprepared to carry out her assigned duties may express lower confidence. Likewise, a poll worker's partisan affiliation and whether her preferred candidate is successful may impact her perception of the system's fairness, just like a regular voter. With this background, I now turn to discussing the poll worker recruitment program that was first implemented in the 2020 General Election and whether students' experiences comport with the literature's expectations.

³ Poll workers in the United States are typically temporary works paid between \$100-164 depending on task assigned, jurisdiction size, and election type (see Kimball, et al., 2009).

⁴ See Pew Research Center (2024) report "Voters Broadly Positive About How Elections Were Conducted, in Sharp Contrast to 2020" available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/12/04/voters-broadly-positive-about-how-elections-were-conducted-in-sharp-contrast-to-2020/> (accessed January 25, 2025).

Working as a Poll Worker

Background & Initial Pilot

While encouraging students to serve as poll workers and participate in the electoral process is not new, the 2020 presidential election represented a unique experience for students. As part of the Fall 2020 semester, I encouraged my introduction to American government students to volunteer at the polls. While not a formal requirement of the course, I provided extra credit, and students who successfully completed training and signed up to work in the polls on Election Day would be compensated by the respective jurisdiction. Given my work as an election canvasser, I partnered with a local county clerk and various regional municipal clerks (townships and cities) to provide training, connect students with clerks seeking poll workers, and to engage students in the post-election auditing and certification process.⁵ While my American government courses always include an experiential component requiring students to participate in a governmental process of their choosing, this is the first time that I deliberately guided students to work in the polls, motivated by both a desire for them to engage in a consequential election and also to assist local clerks who desperately needed poll workers given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 “pilot” was basic in its design elements. Students were given a presentation in class, as part of the regular material on elections, about Michigan election law and procedures. I invited the Bay County Clerk to attend class session and discuss voter registration, how to cast a ballot, and address questions that students may have. During this presentation, I detailed the extra

⁵ In Michigan, election canvassers are members of the county Board of Canvassers who are responsible for auditing and certifying election results within their jurisdictions. A relatively routine, ministerial role, the canvassing process serves as an important check in ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the election. Each county in Michigan (83 in total) has a board, and each board is composed of four members, two each from the Democratic and Republican parties. Board members are nominated for four-year renewable terms by the county party chairperson submitted to the county clerk, who then submits three names for election to the county board of commissioners who must select (“elect”) the canvasser in a secret ballot. The county clerk will often provide a recommendation to the board of which nominee to select. I served on the Bay County Board of Canvassers for ten years before stepping down (in the aftermath of 2020) and becoming a consultant/assistant to the board.

credit opportunity to work the elections (which would also satisfy the students' experiential learning course requirement, too). Out of four sections (with approximately 50 students each), about 75 students expressed formal interest and signed up to get trained. Training was provided on campus approximately a month and half before Election Day by the Bay County Clerk and me. In total, 54 students attended the training and received their formal certifications as "election inspectors" for the state of Michigan. Following the training, students shared their availability and preferences on Election Day (e.g., can only work in the morning, willing to drive more than 30 minutes, able to operate the electronic pollbook, etc.). This information was dispersed to local clerks within Bay County, and clerks followed up directly with students to hire them as poll workers.

The vast majority of students ended up working the election, either for a local clerk in Bay County (n=41), during the post-election audit (n=5), or for their home clerks elsewhere in Michigan (n=5).⁶ To receive credit for the course and receive the extra credit, students had to provide me with evidence of their training (if they were not trained by the Bay County Clerk or me), an official notice from the local clerk that they worked the election itself, and finally a short reflection on what they saw, learned, and thought about the experience.⁷ Nearly all students who participated submitted the required elements. While most students worked the polls, a handful participated in the post-election auditing process conducted by the Bay County Board of Canvassers. Since I was still serving on the board, I supervised these students who effectively shadowed me as I conducted my audits and certified wins.

⁶ Once trained by a Michigan election administrator, poll workers can work in any jurisdiction in the state.

⁷ All election inspectors receive a formal training certificate by the clerk who trains them. The participating clerks provided students with a signed letter template drafted by me and completed by the clerk attesting that they worked the polls on Election Day or participated in the post-election canvassing process.

In hindsight, the 2020 election proved to be quite controversial, contested, and ultimately quite the live fire exercise for students, poll workers, and election administrators alike. For students working the polls on Election Day itself, most clerks tasked them with serving as junior members of the precinct team, helping to check in voters, verify identities, maintain the electronic pollbook, issue ballots, and help maintain decorum in the precinct. Given their youth and familiarity with computing, many students served as the inspector responsible for navigating and utilizing the electronic pollbook (“e-pollbook”). Beyond the pollbook, others were tasked with making sure voters behaved in line, and a few students actually served as chairpersons of their precincts given their previous experiences working the polls (about a dozen students indicated that they had previously served as a poll worker). Most students served the entire time the polls were open (7:00am to 8:00pm), arriving at 6:00am and leaving well after the polls closed (a couple precincts did not complete their work until after midnight!). No students were assigned to work an absentee counting board given those positions were prioritized for poll workers who were older and more susceptible to COVID-19.

A handful of students opted to work in the post-election “canvassing” period, where the Bay County Board of Canvassers conducts its audits and certifications in conjunction with the Bay County Clerk. All local municipalities within Bay County are subject to the Board’s jurisdiction, meaning all students who worked a Bay County precinct would have their work scrutinized by the canvassers (and, by extension, their instructor!). All meetings of the Board are open to the public, although Michigan Election Law specifies that only sworn canvassers and board assistants may actually handle election records and ballots. As such, these students mostly observed the process, albeit from a ring-side seat as canvassers showed students the records, how to audit them, and finally what certification of a precinct looks like. In the event that irregularities or other errors were found, students observed how the canvassers identified problems and resolve them.

For this particular canvass, a few precincts required re-tabulation, a process where the Board orders the ballots from a precinct to be re-ran by a tabulator to ensure that the pollbook's list of voters matches with the number of ballots tabulated. Throughout the canvassing period, students witnessed several different kinds of errors and how the canvassing process ensures that errors are caught, corrected, and ultimately that the election results are valid once certified.

Following the election, students debriefed their experiences with the larger class. For students who worked in the polls on Election Day, students shared their experiences about a week after the election. For those who were engaged in the canvassing process, they shared their experiences on a rolling basis, since the canvassing period takes place for approximately two weeks following an election. These class conversations happened before any student submitted their formal reflection papers, providing them an opportunity to organize their thoughts alongside their classmates' questions and comments. Moreover, the debrief process was an important opportunity for all students to learn about the integrity of the election process as Donald Trump and Republicans began their litigation onslaught and attempts at overturning the 2020 election results. Rather than the instructor providing commentary from the "pulpit," students who had actually experienced the elections from the administrative side – and those witnessing the auditing afterwards – provided invaluable commentary that helped to counteract the fraud narratives circulating in the national and social media spheres. I explore more of this feedback and its pedagogical benefit in the next section.

2022 Election Cycle

During the 2022 midterms, I again recruited students to work elections and participate in the post-canvassing period. At this point, I no longer was teaching introduction to American government and

instead was recruiting more generally from political science majors and minors. The program this cycle was much smaller than in 2020 for several reasons:

First, several clerks who had previously participated had left office (retirements, resignations, or had lost reelection), requiring me to re-build relationships. This was further complicated by the previous Bay County Clerk retiring from office and my resignation from the Bay County Board of Canvassers as a formal member. Second, the midterm nature meant “lower” turnout expectations, meaning several jurisdictions did not anticipate needing as many poll workers as in 2020, meaning there were fewer spots. Third, the post-2020 world had placed election officials, administrators, and poll workers squarely in the hairs of election-deniers who began sometimes very coordinated, local campaigns to harass election workers. This triggered a chilling effect that was reflected by many students who simply did not want to volunteer as they feared they themselves may be targeted or otherwise did not want to deal with the hostility. Indeed, many students who had participated in the 2020 program expressed disillusionment and despair and were unwilling to volunteer again.

As a result, I was not able to recruit as many students as I had previously in 2020. However, this experience did uncover several challenges associated with deploying a program like this beyond the classroom, challenges I will detail more in the next section.

2024 General Election

I became the Cardinals Vote Coordinator for my university in May 2024. In this role, I was tasked with leading the University’s voter registration and civic engagement initiatives for the 2024 election cycle, specifically the November General Election. As part of this new role, I was given resources to bolster and enhance the University’s programming and education efforts, many of which I had been doing previously as part of my service obligations as a faculty member. As part of our election

efforts, I aimed to make the poll worker recruitment program a university-wide initiative and that would move beyond just political science classes and students.

This program utilized the same principles and goals undergirding the 2020 pilot: recruit and train students to assist in the precincts and post-election auditing process for local and regional clerks. In partnership with the Bay County Clerk's office, we recruited students to work both in the polls on Election Day itself but also as part of the early voting period preceding the August primary and November general elections.⁸ We followed a similar procedure as to the 2020 cycle: students signed up to participate, clerks provided training on campus specifically for students (or students could attend one of the community trainings held off-campus), and student information was shared with area clerks. In addition to Cardinals Vote student workers actively recruiting students at educational events and voter registration drives, Cardinals Vote partnered with other civic-focused groups operating on campus, including the Work Elections Program (which provided two student fellows tasked with poll worker recruitment).⁹

There were several challenges and successes with this much larger program. In terms of successes, over 100 students signed up for poll worker training, although the number of those trained was much lower and proved harder to track given there were a considerable number of trainings that were being provided off campus that many students likely took advantage of, including in their home communities. However, we were able to confirm that almost two dozen students assisted in early voting, Election Day in-person precincts, or in post-election canvassing

⁸ As part of constitutional reforms adopted in 2022, Michigan now has at least nine days of early voting preceding Election Day (localities may provide up to 28 days of early voting). This early voting period includes opportunities for voters to cast their ballot and place it in a tabulator, often at "voting centers" that are centrally located and combine multiple jurisdictions and precincts together. Within my university's region, two of the three counties had countywide voting centers, including Bay County. For more information on Michigan's early voting rules, see <https://www.michigan.gov/sos/elections/voting/early-in-person-voting> (accessed January 26, 2025).

⁹ An affiliate of the Fair Election Center, more information about the program can be found here: <https://workelections.org/> (accessed January 26, 2025).

within Bay and Saginaw counties.¹⁰ Challenges abounded, though, including: (1) Coordinating between the various clerks in a timely and coordinated fashion; there was much ad hoc engagement and often too close to the election and other deadlines; (2) A better way to collect, share, and update information about volunteers, often due to lack of coordination among multiple civic groups on campus and not having a centralized clearinghouse; and (3) Considerable unease from students about working the polls given anticipated violence and the continuing fallout of election denialism, which reduced the number of volunteers.

Despite these challenges, though, feedback from clerks and students who volunteered was positive. Indeed, and as discussed below, there is now momentum among area clerks to help create a more formalized process for recruiting students to work the polls. These efforts, formalized in an emerging working group of myself, clerks, and community engagement groups, will hopefully bear fruit for the 2026 midterm elections.

Lessons & Challenges

Student Feedback

Through the debriefing process in class, student reflection papers, and general feedback from participants during the 2022 and 2024 cycles, a very unexpected finding emerged: students who worked the elections expressed greater resistance to claims of election fraud and integrity issues. This was most pronounced in the 2020 election cycle. In many student reflection papers, they noted that they found it difficult to believe that the election had been rigged, at least within the jurisdiction they had worked. In summary, many noted that the process was transparent, had several built-in checks and balances, required multiple election workers to agree, and also

¹⁰ My university's home counties are Bay, Midland, and Saginaw, broadly referred to as the Great Lakes Bay Region or "tri-city" area (named for Bay City, Midland, and Saginaw cities, the respective seats for their eponymous counties).

included poll workers from both political parties. For the few students who worked with the canvass board's during its post-election audits, they noted that most issues uncovered by the canvassers were benign; often, it was human error that was both readily detected in the election records and easily explained.

While exposure to the election process undoubtedly raises students' understanding of it, it was how this exposure seemed to insulate many of them from their co-partisans' assaults on the election's integrity. This was most observable during the class debrief discussions, which included more peers who had not worked the election and were being exposed to the media firestorm surrounding claims of electoral fraud. I share one memorable exchange here:¹¹

Regular Student: "I feel like this election just had so many problems. We can't possibly know everything bad that had happened. Like, I'm sure there were people who weren't registered to vote who did, which made it difficult for Republicans to win."

Poll Worker Student: "Well, I didn't see any of that when I was working the polls. And I was in a Republican area – my hometown is solidly conservative – and we made sure that everyone who came into the school [precinct location] had proper ID and was on the QVF [Qualified Voter File, or voter registration list]."

Regular Student: "Are you positive, though? Couldn't they have used a faked ID?"

Poll Worker Student: "How? I had to verify their signature on file with the SOS [Secretary of State's office] and make sure they matched. Plus, many of these people I knew or another inspector did since we're from [city's name]."

Regular Student: "Yeah, but Trump lost [city's county's name]!"

Poll Worker Student: "Yeah, but he won [city name]. And I believe that he lost the county because the election rules didn't just apply to Republican-leaning towns; they applied across the board."

Regular Student: "I'm not sure I believe that."

Poll Worker Student: "Look, I voted for Donald Trump. I voted for him this year, but that doesn't mean he was going to win just because I voted for him and most people I know voted for him. If you were going to rig an election, why make it so close here in Michigan?"

¹¹ These class sessions were being recorded due to the hybrid nature of the class given the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing me to have a transcript of exchanges. This particular exchange occurred approximately two weeks after the November 2020 election.

Regular Student: “To make it look good, or, I don’t know. You don’t want people thinking it’s that rigged.”

Poll Worker Student: “I just think this is bad for Republicans who won many races in this same election to claim that it’s only rigged for president. That doesn’t make any sense, and sure doesn’t reflect my experience working the polls. I mean, not one fellow [Republican] inspector thought it was rigged in my precinct.”

This exchange is representative of other exchanges between co-partisans (namely Republicans) and those expressing doubt in the fairness of the 2020 elections during the debrief discussions. As this exchange showcases, the student who worked the polls, despite being a Trump supporter, not only cast aspersions on claims of fraud, but did so with examples of how difficult it would be to commit fraud on a sufficiently large enough scale to effectively throw the election in Biden’s favor. In some of these exchanges, the students expressing doubt in the election’s integrity would follow up with questions about the process, which poll worker students were happy to answer. In some instances, I provided some clarification to these exchanges, but I mostly permitted students to discuss themselves.

However, there were some students who served as election inspectors who expressed some doubts about the election’s integrity. These students often contested the process of allowing voters without photo identification to sign an affidavit and be permitted to cast a ballot. Others noted that it seemed like some voters, despite appearing on the registration lists, shouldn’t be allowed to vote and may have been trying to vote illegally. Telling, though, none of the students who participated in the post-election canvass expressed reservations about the process, fairness, or integrity of the election; instead, the most common critique offered by them was that poll workers needed greater training before an election.

It is common practice to debrief following experiential learning exercises, and the debriefs here not only allow students to focus their learning but also to apply it to a real, on-going conversation about election integrity. Moreover, the experience provided extremely beneficial for

all students since students were the ones opposing and correcting misguided views about the election's process and fairness. However, I have no data about whether this moved the needle in terms of students who, at least initially, questioned the election's integrity. Indeed, I wasn't expecting the exchanges that I did witness; I had thought it would track along partisan lines, and I feared that the conversation would become heated quickly. Instead, students were indeed passionate but largely respectful of each other; the fieriest exchanges were those between fellow partisans.

Logistical Challenges & Working with External Partners

Implementing this poll worker program has uncovered several logistical challenges that, while not insurmountable, do require a proactive strategy to overcome. I note three significant ones here:

First, the biggest logistical challenge is recruiting students and ensuring that they (1) get trained and (2) are connected with election officials so they can be assigned to a jurisdiction. While recruitment is less of an issue in a self-contained class section, it still requires collecting information about students and then transmitting that information to relevant election administrators who can offer formal training and certification. For the 2024 cycle, our university-wide poll worker recruitment program encountered difficulties with ensuring that students not only signed up but then were able to connect with training opportunities. We believe that this was an issue with our high signup/interest numbers, but relatively low numbers of students who were actually trained and certified to be election inspectors.

Second, and relatedly, there are challenges with coordinating among the various partners that must participate and work together. Election administrators are critical to this endeavor, and making sure that you maintain communication with these officers and establish good, equitable, and reciprocal relationships is crucial. For recruiting poll workers, the de-centralized nature of

elections in many states means coordinating among many election officials, training opportunities, and jurisdictional requirements for working the polls. In all three iterations of the poll worker program, this has meant relying on local clerks to be willing to provide special, student-only training and clerks having access to interested students' information so they can connect and ultimately hire them to work.

In addition to clerks, there are also numerous civic groups that are more than willing to assist in these recruitment efforts, but these groups often simply facilitate the exchange of information between the volunteer and the clerk's office. We found that the Work Elections Program (as detailed above) was helpful in facilitating student signups, but less so in getting that information to clerks and sharing it with us so we could continue to assist students. Indeed, one clerk during the 2024 cycle expressed frustration with these national databases as not being user-friendly and ultimately not helpful to election administrators trying to recruit workers as they don't allow the clerks to remove names, indicating whether the person has been trained, or noting which elections the volunteer is available to help, among other concerns. As such, there is a need to not only maintain relationships with your local and regional election officials, but also to create better coordination among all the various entities working to recruit students as poll workers and ultimately get them into the polls.

A final complicating factor is the rise of fear among would-be volunteers. Many students in the 2022 cycle, including several who had volunteered in 2020, expressed considerable concerns about working the elections, ultimately declining invitations to work the polls again. These fears are not unfounded, as election workers remain targets of election deniers, conspiracy theorists, and politicians. As such, there is a need to ensure that students are aware of federal, state, and local jurisdictions' security efforts to ensure election precincts and workers remain safe for all. As part of our recruitment efforts for the 2024 elections, clerks took time during the formal election trainings

to showcase how the polls would be secure against people looking to illegally disrupt election operations or otherwise cause harm to election workers themselves. Moreover, we included information about poll worker safety in our initial recruitment information. Hopefully, the post-2024 election makes this less of a concern in future elections.

Next Steps

As we approach the 2026 midterms, we aim to continue to expand and improve the poll worker recruitment program. A working group of local clerks, community and civic engagement groups, and myself are designing a central clearinghouse program that will allow regional clerks to have access to dynamic information about students willing to work the polls. The idea behind the clearinghouse is to facilitate better coordination for all parties involved, from start to finish. For example, the clearinghouse will allow clerks to update profiles of volunteers to note if they have been trained and certified, schedules, if they have been hired by a jurisdiction, etc. This will make the recruitment and training process more efficient. We hope to have a pilot of this clearinghouse go live for the municipal elections in 2025, and a more formal deployment during the Michigan 2026 primary and general elections (when all statewide offices are on the ballot in addition to the U.S. House and a U.S. Senate seat).

While this paper has focused on detailing the poll worker program and student experiences with it, the logical next step is to empirically assess whether the program is having its desired impact. This includes assessing whether students who work elections are more or less likely to express dissatisfaction with the election process, including electoral integrity and fairness. So far, the feedback from students above is anecdotal and not systematically collected. As such, I would welcome feedback on how best to go about designing an empirical study that assesses the program's outcomes.

Conclusion

Student poll workers offer a promising avenue for strengthening democratic trust and enhancing electoral integrity. As suggested here, direct participation in the electoral process as poll workers not only enhances students' understanding of election administration but also insulates them from misinformation regarding voter fraud and election security. While anecdotal, students' reflections and in-class discussions suggest that working the polls serves as a powerful counterweight to partisan narratives of election fraud. However, logistical obstacles persist; the decentralized nature of U.S. elections, coordination among multiple stakeholders, and increasing threats to election workers complicate student participation. Addressing these challenges requires more structured partnerships between universities, election administrators, and civic organizations.

Beyond logistical and implementation questions, future research should systematically assess the effects of poll worker participation on students' attitudes toward election integrity. If confirmed, such findings would have significant implications for civic education and democratic engagement, reinforcing the importance of experiential learning in safeguarding our nation's elections and democracy. Ultimately, integrating students into the electoral process not only fills a critical workforce gap but may also cultivate a new generation of informed, engaged, and democracy-defending citizens.

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