

Strategies for Success: Starting a College Poll Worker Program

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ABSTRACT

Suppose we held an election but no one came to work as an election worker? This actually happens throughout the United States in big cities and in small towns in nearly every election. An acute shortage of qualified poll workers nationwide threatens the success of U.S. elections. The average age of a poll worker is 72. An aging pool of poll workers is not being replaced by its younger counterpart. Where can towns, cities, municipal governments go to find people to work the polls? One major resource is college campuses. This article highlights six strategies for successfully starting a student poll worker on a college campus. We field tested the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's *Guidebook for Recruiting College Pollworkers* and recruited over 150 students to serve as poll workers on election-day, November 2006 in the city of Boston.

Introduction

"I helped a Somalian woman vote for the first time," wrote a student. "It was the most patriotic feeling I've ever had." Federalism. Local control. Entitled services. Basic rights. Elections have it all. Serving as a poll worker is one of the best ways for students to learn about the "messiness" of democracy and the challenges of and obstacles to ensuring that *every* election is fair. Mobilizing students to serve as poll workers on election-day through a college poll worker program is a key way to energize young people about voting and about the electoral process more generally. More broadly, student poll worker programs help ensure that a new generation of young people steps up to the plate on election-day to guarantee the proper administration of elections.

The challenges facing the United States' electoral process are vast—from the problems posed by voting machines and ballot design to the controversy surrounding voter IDs. The United States will make critical decisions in the coming months and years about who votes and how.

A less noted, yet equally critical problem, is the issue of poll location staffing. The United States faces a poll worker crisis—an acute shortage of at least 500,000 poll workers nationwide, and inadequate

training for volunteers facing increasingly complex tasks (Zaino, 2006). Every election cycle, election departments scrape by with barely enough poll workers at the more than 180,000 polling sites across the nation. Election departments must find thousands of qualified, service oriented individuals who can accommodate the diverse sets of needs voters bring to the polls, including providing translation services and understanding how to accommodate people with disabilities.

Poll Worker Crisis

Municipalities struggle with high absentee rates among poll workers—volunteers who quit shortly before the election, or who simply fail to show up on election-day. These shortages results in long lines, polling locations opening late or closing altogether, and voting irregularities which threaten the very process of democracy.

Complicating the picture is the fact that this population of volunteers is declining every year. The Election Assistance Commission estimates that the average age of a poll worker is 72 years old. Without a massive nationwide mobilization of committed, well-trained election-day volunteers, election departments across the country will find themselves in dire circumstances as the aging poll worker population diminishes further with no replacements.

The computerization of elections poses additional challenges. A survey of poll workers in Cuyahoga County, Ohio conducted by the Election Science Institute indicated that 57% of poll workers felt they had not received enough hands-on training in using voting machines prior to the election (Hertzberg, 2006). Moreover, the percentage of workers who felt their training was sufficient correlated with age; those over 65 expressed the lowest comfort levels (Hertzberg, 2006).

As elections are becoming increasingly technology-driven, election officials must find poll workers who possess high comfort levels with computers and other new technologies. Young people are

an excellent resource. Moreover, young people tend to have high levels of energy and can make it through the typical 15-hour work day of a poll worker.

Youth voting has risen in recent elections, but the percentages of 18-24 year-olds who vote still trails their older counterparts significantly. According to U.S. Census Bureau Surveys in the 2004 presidential election, youth voting surged by 11 percentage points, to 47 percent, while 66 percent of people over 25 years of age voted and 72 percent of citizens 55 years and older voted. A key difference between the age cohorts is registration. 79 percent of citizens 55 years and older were registered to vote while only 58 percent of younger citizens were (Holder, 2006). Most attribute these discrepancies to the high levels of transience among people in their twenties combined with the uniquely decentralized nature of the American electoral landscape.

A Potential Response—Student Poll Workers

What is to be done? Municipalities around the country are piloting programs, many sponsored by the Election Assistance Commission, to recruit and train college students. College students represent a unique population—well educated and accustomed to learning new skills, college students are also comfortable with computers and other technologies. College students can also often manage the physical requirements of poll working—carrying heavy supplies and equipment and working the long hours.

Although appeals to students to “get involved” and “vote” can have some impact, placing students at the center of a polling location, giving them some authority, and having them help democracy function is one of the best hands-on learning experiences they can have. College poll worker programs truly engage students in the electoral process; moreover, such programs offer students a true appreciation for the enormous logistical headaches involved in ensuring that basic rights are protected and upheld. Students develop new understanding of the rights and privileges of citizenship, and new skills, such as how to ensure access for someone with a disability and how to be sensitive to the needs of a diverse population.

In our surveys of student poll workers, we found that 91% of our students were *definitely* or *likely* to work as a poll worker in future elections. We also found that despite some student misgivings over wishing they had had more hands-on training, 74% of them were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall experience as a poll worker. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the levels of student satisfaction with their experience as poll workers.

TABLE 1: LIKLIHOOD OF FUTURE PARTICIPATION

Indicate how likely you are to do the following...

	Definitely	Likely	Unsure	Unlikely	Definitely Not
Recommend to other Students	35%	61%	4%	0%	0%
Work as poll worker in future elections	39%	52%	4%	4%	0%
Vote in Next Election	74%	17%	4%	4%	0%

TABLE 2: SATISFACTION WITH POLL WORKER EXPERIENCE

Overall, how would you rate your experience as a poll worker?

Very satisfied	35%
Satisfied	39%
Neutral	13%
Unsatisfied	4%
Very Unsatisfied	4%

Starting a Poll Worker Program at Suffolk

Beginning a college poll worker program has some high start-up costs, yet once established, such programs serve as excellent service learning opportunities for students and help municipalities by providing a fresh group of poll workers on whom they can rely.

Suffolk University was one of three pilot sites to field test a guidebook, prepared the Center for Election Integrity at Cleveland State University (Ohio) for the United States Election Assistance Commission, on how to successfully recruit college students to serve as poll workers on election-day.¹ We ran a college poll worker program on our campus, and we worked closely with our three partner sites in developing ideas and materials.

We recruited students from across the university. A political science Masters student helped lead the effort by talking with professors in a variety of disciplines (Political Science, Philosophy, Sociology, Communications, etc.) and visiting classes for 5 minute stints to engage student interest and answer any questions. In addition, we made announcements at faculty assemblies, sent out mass emails to professors and to students to encourage participation. Some professors allowed students to earn service-learning credit; others simply gave the students an excused absence from class; yet others thoroughly incorporated the experience into their courses using academic credit, service learning credit and writing to make the experience more meaningful.

Our budget allowed us to provide every poll worker with a free t-shirt which they wore on election-day. We also drove around the city of Boston on election-day itself and provided food to students (and their poll worker colleagues). We did not reimburse students for transportation costs, but several colleges do and that may be an added incentive.

All poll workers in Boston are paid for their time. College poll workers are no different. They all received monetary compensation for working as a poll worker on election-day. Individual professors,

¹ The three pilot sites included a community college, Grand Rapids Community College the Grand Rapids City Clerk's Office (Michigan); a public university, Cleveland State University and the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections (Ohio); and a private university, Suffolk University and the City of Boston's Election department (Massachusetts).

however, had discretion about the extent to which they would make participation count toward a student's final grade.

Student Learning across the Disciplines

Working as a poll worker teaches students many crucial lessons about American democracy and government and these can be incorporated into an enormous number of disciplines from political science to computer science. For any introduction to American government, studying elections affords a natural opportunity to discuss federalism. Spencer Overton notes, “Americans do not have a single uniform set of rules for voting, or even 50 separate state election systems—effectively, there are 4,600 different election systems” (Overton, 2006). For a public policy course, a student might study the power and discretion of “street-level bureaucrats”—the public employee who actually performs the actions that implements laws (see Hall et. Al., 2006). Students gain an appreciation for what “local control” is all about. A philosophy course might capitalize on the concept of “local control” in discussing a bureaucrats’ ethical responsibilities in honoring laws and regulations and how co-workers should react when they observe violations. History courses and other political science courses might focus on the development of voting rights in the United States and trace the expansion (and contraction) of the franchise over time and the institutionalization of federal laws that ultimately require things such as bilingual ballots compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. A computer science course might investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the variety of forms of “electronic voting”—the merits of paper ballots, or the proper design of machines to accommodate voters’ needs. Finally, all students who work as poll workers might be encouraged to ponder the question “who votes”? Did the voters “look” like the students? Were they young or old? Did they represent the district? Why or why not?

Although there are real (and worthy!) start-up costs for implementing a successful poll worker recruitment program, once the program is up and running, the program can largely run itself and can endure over time. Our goal is to build a sustainable program that becomes part of our university culture.

Now that we have a solid working relationship with our municipal government partner (the City of Boston) and we have the full support of the university administration and we have worked out the details, our main goal is to continuously advertise the program to faculty and encourage incorporation of the program into their syllabi.

Six Strategies for Success

We learned several key lessons about strategies for success, which can be used by governments and colleges and universities to develop their own poll worker programs.

Strategy Number 1: Develop a Close Working Relationship with Your Local Election Department

The first step to initiating any program is to learn about the legal requirements imposed by both the state and the municipality on poll workers. Do poll workers need to be over 18? Must they be residents of the state? Of the municipality? Calling the state office that manages elections and the local election commissioner is a key first step. Most local election commissioners will welcome student volunteers with open arms. Find out as much as possible about key legal requirements, voter registration deadlines, and the general times and locations of poll worker trainings. Some municipalities even let non-citizens work as translators at the polls. The City of Boston has paid interpreters at many of their polling locations. While all *poll workers* must be registered voters in the state of Massachusetts, *interpreters* have no such restrictions placed on them and do not have citizenship requirements. Communication is the key to success. Weekly meetings—whether by phone or in-person—between the campus and the election department should occur at least six-weeks prior to the election.

Strategy Number 2: Develop a Close Working Relationship with the College Administration

Obtaining the buy-in and support from the college's administration is critical to a poll worker program's success. All students who work as poll workers should have excused absences and the college administration should support students in this. No student should be penalized in any way for his or her participation in a college poll worker program.

Strategy Number 3: Recruit Students

One of the best recruitment tools available to colleges is the integration of a poll worker program into a course. Successful programs have used poll worker programs as service-learning opportunities, offered course credit, or have offered poll work in lieu of a research paper. Many students are pleasantly surprised to learn that they can earn course credit and get paid when they serve as poll workers. Entire courses can be designed around the poll worker experience, from the history of elections to civic engagement, to understanding how municipal governments function, to computer science classes that investigate voter technologies. Indeed, an enormous range of disciplines exists to which a program such as this can be applied.

Working closely with student activities offices and student groups is another excellent way to recruit students. Often such offices have critical email lists, can post advertisements on websites, on campus televisions, and set up tables at activity fairs, etc.

Strategy Number 4: Coping with Students Who either Cannot Serve as Poll Workers or Who are not Qualified

Students can do many other things in lieu of serving as a poll worker if, for whatever reason they are either not able to commit the time on election-day itself or are not legally allowed to serve. Instructors can encourage their students to:

- Volunteer for a local political campaign
- Volunteer with an advocacy campaign or civic action organization involved with election reform or monitoring issues
- Create their own blogs on political issues
- Facilitate other students' applications for absentee ballots
- Work for a get out the vote effort (GOTV)
- Work on a voter registration drive

- Volunteer for the local election board office before Election-day
- Write a paper on some aspect of the electoral process
- Write an essay on the importance of voting

Strategy Number 5: Supplement Training

Service-learning research is clear: the quality of a student's overall experience and satisfaction with learning is very much tied to the quality of training they receive *prior* to service participation (Astin et. al., 2000). For some students, the first time they serve as a poll worker will also be the first time they have ever stepped foot in a polling location. Hence, the more opportunities students are offered to understand the lay of the land of what voting looks and feels like, the better. The quality of poll worker training program varies widely across the United States (see Hall et. Al., 2007). Some programs run for more than three-hours, are hands-on, and require that trainees take a final test before entering the polls; others run for less than two hours, offer no hands-on practice, and lecture to rooms of fifty people or more. Instructors would do well to attend the training offered by the municipality and develop supplementary materials for the students, including hands-on experiences with voting equipment and ballots. This not only gives the students more confidence and sense of readiness for election-day, it ultimately helps voters to have exceptionally well prepared service providers.

If possible, arrange with local election officials to offer trainings on campus, providing multiple times and locations so that students can work such requirements into their busy schedules.

Poll worker training highlights so many aspects of American democracy and American electoral politics—the quality of voting technology; the development of voting rights and the key role of interest groups in this development, from the participation of historic Civil Rights groups to the enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act; the wide discretion and power of local officials to uphold or deny voting rights; cultural interpretations of voting, and so on.

Strategy 6: Thank Yous

As obvious as it may seem, thanking students for participation—thank you letters, certificates, or parties—all go a long way toward making the experience a positive one for students. Ideally, we want student satisfaction levels to be so high that they want to become a poll worker for years to come. Everyone involved in the process—from the administration to the professors who implemented the program to the staff who fielded student phone calls—should all receive thank yous for taking the time to ensure the success of this critical program.

Conclusion

The 2000 election highlighted many of the key problems faced by our electoral system. Municipalities and states scrambled to implement reforms including creating and deploying high-tech voting machines, redesigning ballots, cleaning voter registration rolls and setting up ID requirements. Yet all the technology in the world cannot substitute for people who know how to work the technology. The electoral process breaks down without poll workers. A new generation of well-trained poll workers is critical for the future of the U.S. electoral process. Campuses around the country represent a terrific and still untapped resource of personnel and ideas. It's time for them to step up to the plate to make elections work.

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