

POLL WORKER RECRUITMENT:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A BETTER VOTER EXPERIENCE

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O V E R V I E W

Poll workers play an indispensable role in our democratic system, providing the workforce necessary for administering elections in a nation of over 330 million. Poll worker shortages can result in polling place closures and consolidations, increasing confusion on Election Day and the likelihood of voters having to experience long waits at the polls.

To make it as easy as possible for all voters to participate in our elections and for every election official to serve their voters, states should take steps to increase poll worker recruitment among all communities, including multilingual people and younger, more tech-savvy individuals, particularly students. Current election policies in some states make poll worker recruitment unnecessarily difficult.

This report outlines some best practices that Fair Elections Center has identified through its WorkElections project, which began in 2016 and aims to help election administrators across the country broaden and diversify their pool of poll workers and meet staffing needs. WorkElections' data and API were used by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to help create its poll worker recruitment portal in 2020 and by Power the Polls in its nationwide efforts to expand poll worker recruitment in 2020 and 2022.

Below, we outline several recommendations aimed at reducing limitations on who can serve as poll workers and improving voters' interactions with poll workers when they go to vote. These proposals will enable election administrators to recruit a more diverse pool of poll workers and will provide them with greater flexibility to meet their staffing needs. They include the following:

- **Recruiting the Next Generation of Poll Workers**
 - Allow 16-Year-Olds to be Poll Workers
 - Require Jurisdictions to Participate in High School Student Poll Worker Programs
 - Allow College Students to Serve in Jurisdictions Where They Study
- **Increasing Flexibility**
 - Implement Flexible Residency Requirements
 - De-emphasize the Role of Political Parties in Recruitment and Hiring
 - Create Opportunities for Unaffiliated Voters to Serve
 - Consider Establishing Part-Day Shifts
- **Improving the Experience**
 - Launch Online Poll Worker Applications
 - Increase Compensation
 - Establish Minimum Training Requirements

RECRUITING THE NEXT GENERATION OF POLL WORKERS

Allow 16-Year-Olds to be Poll Workers

Most states allow high school students to serve as poll workers or to participate in student-specific poll worker assistant roles. Utilizing high school students as poll workers, including those who are too young to be eligible to vote, is a win-win, as it helps expand the pool of tech-savvy poll workers while also introducing young people to the election process.

States should establish policies to allow 16-year-olds to serve as poll workers. Most of the states have already done so, and those that have not should follow suit.

Some states allow for expanded participation. For example, Missouri allows 15-year-old students to be “youth election participants”, and Virginia’s election day page program is open to all high school students.¹

Example: Wyoming

*Wyoming’s election code specifies that each “county clerk may appoint persons who are at least sixteen (16) years of age to serve as judges of election or members of counting boards if such persons meet all other requirements for qualification of an elector.”*²

1) Mo. Stat. § 115.104; Va. Code § 24.2-604.3

2) Wyo. Stat. § 22-8-102.

Require Jurisdictions to Participate in High School Student Poll Worker Programs

Some states offer dedicated student poll worker programs (designed to allow high school students to get involved) yet leave the choice of whether to participate in the program up to each local election jurisdiction in the state rather than establishing a uniform statewide policy.

Enabling local jurisdictions to establish student programs is a good start, but an “opt-in” arrangement is not ideal. This policy can create confusion among the public as to where the programs are being run, results in unequal opportunities for students depending on where in the state they reside, and deprives voters in non-participating jurisdictions of the additional services these student poll workers could provide. While election administrators should not be required to hire any particular student poll worker, they should be required to consider them as applicants.



Allow College Students to Serve in Jurisdictions Where They Study

Many college students attend academic institutions outside of the jurisdiction or state in which they are registered to vote. Therefore, states that require poll workers to be registered voters or electors (unregistered but eligible to do so) in the jurisdiction or state in which they serve cannot utilize this pool of potential poll workers. States should adopt policies that make it easy for election administrators to hire college students as poll workers in the communities where colleges are located, without limiting the pool to those who are legal residents or registered voters of that state or jurisdiction.

Instead, states should allow college students to serve as poll workers regardless of their permanent address or where they are registered to vote, so long as they are U.S. citizens currently enrolled at an academic institution located in the state.

Example: Illinois

Illinois empowers election jurisdictions to hire college students as poll workers, even if they are not registered to vote in the jurisdiction. Students must be “currently enrolled in a community college, as defined in the Public Community College Act, or a public or private Illinois university or college”, hold U.S. citizenship, have at minimum a 3.0 GPA, complete required training, and meet other requirements of being a poll worker.³ Similar policies should be adopted by other states.

³) 10 Ill. Comp. Stat. 5/13-4(c).



INCREASING FLEXIBILITY

Implement Flexible Residency Requirements

Most states require poll workers to be residents of either the election jurisdiction in which they serve (a specific county or municipality) or of the state. To provide more flexibility for election administrators and to assist them in hiring full rosters of poll workers, all states should adopt the statewide residency requirement rather than the local jurisdiction residency requirement.

Example: Michigan

Michigan requires that poll workers (other than those 16 or 17 years old) be “qualified and registered elector[s] of this state.”⁴ This policy allows city and township clerks to accept applicants from other areas of the state if they are unable to meet staffing needs locally.

De-emphasize the Role of Political Parties in Recruitment and Hiring

While local political parties have historically played a role in recruiting and appointing poll workers in some states, legislators and election administrators should take steps to de-emphasize the role of local political parties as the sole source of workers.

Staff from each election jurisdiction should be the point of contact for members of the public who are interested in becoming poll workers, rather than delegating this responsibility to local party staff or volunteer leadership. States should clarify this policy in their election codes and make clear that once appointed, poll workers serve at the direction of election officials rather than party leadership.

In New Mexico, according to election officials, when the state de-emphasized local parties' roles in recruitment, election administrators were empowered to recruit from a wider swath of the population and improved their ability to meet their staffing needs.

⁴) Mich. Comp. L. § 168.677.

Create Opportunities for Unaffiliated Voters to Serve

While poll worker partisan parity requirements are commonplace, states should take steps to empower election administrators to employ poll workers who are not and have not recently been registered members of a political party. Administrators should not be required to limit recruitment solely to registered Democrats and Republicans.

Consider Establishing Part-Day Shifts

Many people interested in serving as poll workers are unable to commit to working a full day shift of 12 or more hours. Jurisdictions should consider offering part-day shifts for suitable positions, particularly if finding a sufficient workforce to staff the polls through all-day shifts is proving challenging, as doing so will likely increase the potential applicant pool.



IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE

Launch Online Poll Worker Applications

Each state should maintain an accessible online poll worker application with a permanent URL that anyone in the state can use to apply, and which will be accepted by any jurisdiction in the state. This will avoid confusion caused by frequent changes to local jurisdictions' application processes, such as broken hyperlinks, and will enable people to apply without having to print, complete, and mail a paper document.

These online applications should be accessible on mobile devices to maximize ease of use. Additionally, applications should not require applicants to create profiles or accounts on job boards that are more commonly used for long-term government employment applications.

Election administrators can also use online application forms as a way to gather other useful information, such as how applicants heard about the opportunity and what motivated them to apply.

Jurisdictions in states that lack a statewide online application should create their own.

Example (Statewide): Iowa

Iowa's Secretary of State's office maintains an easy-to-use, online application form at <https://pollworker.iowa.gov/>. The state receives and distributes applicants' information to county auditors, who oversee elections in each county.

Doing so streamlines a process that would otherwise result in each of the state's 99 counties having to either develop their own online application forms or establish a less efficient means of identifying prospective poll workers.

Many states have established similar applications that allow them to funnel online applications to the proper local election authority. Others still delegate this responsibility to each local election authority, which can lead to unnecessary confusion and administrative inefficiencies. Rather than requiring applicants to call a phone number or submit a PDF application that then needs to be transcribed, online applications reduce the strain on election officials responsible for meeting staffing needs.

Example (Local): Harris County, Texas

Texas lacks a statewide poll worker application, leaving each of its 254 counties to develop their own recruitment process. Some, like Harris County, maintain online application pages. Harris County's [page](#) allows applicants to indicate if they have in-demand language skills or are registered with a political party.⁶

⁶ Harris County Elections Administrator, Election Worker Application, <https://www.harrisvotes.com/Election-Workers/Election-Worker-Application> (last visited Mar. 28, 2023).

Increase Compensation

Many jurisdictions have increased poll worker compensation in recent years, but some have not. Whether a jurisdiction pays poll workers by the hour or the day, they should set compensation levels to ensure that workers receive no less than the state's minimum hourly wage. Workers should also be compensated for time spent attending training. Jurisdictions should adjust compensation every election cycle to account for shifts in the economic environment.

7) See Nat'l Disability Rights Network et al., *Let People with Disabilities Vote: Recommendations to Improve Access to Voting By Mail 4* (last visited Mar. 28, 2023), available at <https://www.ndrn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/let-people-with-disabilities-vote.pdf>.

Establish Minimum Training Requirements

States should adopt training requirements that apply in every jurisdiction in the state. Training should be mandatory for all first-time poll workers, and returning poll workers should be retrained at regular intervals to ensure they remain familiar with the latest policy updates.

Training should include at least the following topics:

- The voter check-in process
- ID requirements that do and do not apply in the state
- Use of forms and equipment to vote, including accessible equipment for voters with disabilities
- Nondiscrimination policies
- The voting rights of students, voters with limited English proficiency, and people with disabilities, including the right to assistance, in-language materials as applicable to the jurisdiction, and available accommodations
- How to provide helpful information and services to voters, including those with disabilities, without infringing on their privacy, independence, or rights⁷



C O N C L U S I O N

As we have described, there are several steps that state and local elections officials can take to strengthen the poll worker recruitment process and make it easier for citizens to get involved. Some of these recommendations may require legislative action, while others can be made administratively. Election officials should look to their peers for examples of many of the best practices identified in this report. Implementing some or all of these will bolster our election infrastructure and provide additional opportunities for individuals to support election officials and help their neighbors vote.

FAIR ELECTIONS CENTER

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[Fair Elections Center](#) is a national, nonpartisan voting rights and election reform 501(c)(3) organization based in Washington, D.C. Our mission is to use litigation and advocacy to remove barriers to registration and voting, particularly those disenfranchising underrepresented and marginalized communities, and to improve election administration.

WORK ELECTIONS

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Fair Elections Center's [WorkElections](#) aims to help recruit a fresh and diverse cohort of poll workers by providing centralized, accessible information on becoming a poll worker for thousands of jurisdictions nationwide.