

# Poll Worker Experience and Polling Place Operations

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Joshua D. Hostetter<sup>1</sup>  and Lonna R. Atkeson<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Poll workers are street-level bureaucrats who implement policy with limited direct oversight. We ask an important theoretical and practical question: Do experienced and inexperienced poll workers vary systematically in how they operate polling sites? We build on previous work by examining how poll worker training and experience influence their preparedness to operate polling sites and whether more experience leads to better polling place operations. We use a national poll worker survey from the 2022 midterm election to examine how experience relates to job behavior. We find that experienced poll workers are more likely to self-report that training prepared them to work the election. At the same time, poll worker experience leads to more conflicts with poll watchers and voters, and reported difficulties with voting machines. These increased conflicts may be a function of the increased number of duties experienced poll workers have compared to inexperienced ones.

## Keywords

poll workers, election administration, voting, elections

## Introduction

Poll workers are essential to the in-person voting process.<sup>1</sup> They check voters in to vote, confirm that voters have valid identification, issue provisional ballots to voters, and answer voter questions when problems arise. Their necessity for the in-person voting process has at times been problematic because local election officials (LEOs) often lack the necessary quantity of poll worker volunteers to properly staff polling sites (Burden & Milyo, 2015; Hostetter, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Fortunately for LEOs, poll worker turnover is low. Those who have volunteered to be poll workers in the past are likely to do so again in the future (Hostetter & Liz Lebron, 2024; Kimball et al., 2010). On the other hand, scholars have questioned the quality of those who do volunteer to be poll workers (see Alvarez & Hall, 2006; Burden & Milyo, 2015). One area that has received little scholarly inquiry is how poll worker experience influences polling place operations.

In this paper, we ask an important theoretical and practical question: Do experienced and inexperienced poll workers vary systematically in how they operate polling sites? Jones and Stein (2021) consider how poll worker quality influences the election experience by considering poll worker recruitment. We build on previous work (Atkeson et al., 2014; Spencer & Markovits, 2010; Suttman-Lea, 2020) by examining how poll worker experience influences their preparedness to operate polling sites and whether more experience leads to better polling place operations, which we

operationalize as no conflicts with poll watchers, voters, and other poll workers, and no difficulty operating voting machines.

We use a national poll worker survey from the 2022 general election to test for systematic differences between experienced and inexperienced poll workers (Stein et al., 2025). We find that poll worker experience and polling site operations are nuanced. For example, experienced poll workers report higher levels of preparedness to work the election compared to their less experienced counterparts after training, but before their Election Day duties. This indicates that experience interacts with training in the pre-election period to promote preparation to work as a poll worker.

However, when we look at poll worker *behavior* during the election, the results suggest that experienced poll workers may not necessarily always be the best stewards of democracy. We find that more experienced poll workers are more likely to self-report experiencing conflict with poll watchers and voters. We also find that experienced poll workers self-

<sup>1</sup>Political Science, The Citadel Military College of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, USA

<sup>2</sup>Political Science, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Joshua D. Hostetter, Political Science, The Citadel Military College of South Carolina, 171 Moultrie Street, Charleston, SC 29409, USA.

Email: [josh.hostetter87@gmail.com](mailto:josh.hostetter87@gmail.com)

report more difficulty with voting machines. We find evidence to suggest that experiencing conflict may be a combination of poll worker experience and the number of duties given to the poll worker.

We conclude that these findings indicate that poll worker experience likely has a large influence on polling location operations. Previous scholars (Suttman-Lea, 2020; Atkeson et al., 2014) find that poll workers will sometimes ignore their training in favor of their personal preferences. We add to this line of work, but we also consider that experience may lead to more responsibilities at the polling site, which then lead to more polling place conflicts and workplace difficulties.

These findings are important because precincts and vote centers need quality poll workers who will positively interact with voters and each other while carrying out the wishes of local election officials. Positive voter interactions with poll workers influence the legitimacy of and confidence in the electoral process (Atkeson et al., 2014; Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Claassen et al., 2008; Hall et al., 2009).

## Previous Literature

We argue that poll worker experience, measured in terms of years worked, influences the operation of polling sites and vote centers.<sup>3</sup> Given the importance of poll workers to the voting process, there should be a plethora of research on poll worker experience, but that is not the case. However, there is a growing wealth of research on poll workers, which we can use to help us better understand why poll worker experience may influence poll worker behavior.

We identify poll worker experience, time working the polls, and autonomy as the three main factors explaining why experienced poll workers may operate polling sites differently than inexperienced ones. Poll workers who have worked past elections are likely to work in future ones (Hostetter & Liz Lebron, 2024; Kimball et al., 2010), poll workers are in low supply (Alvarez & Hall, 2006; Burden & Milyo, 2015; Hostetter, 2020), and poll workers are autonomous from the LEOs they serve (Bassi et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2009; Montjoy, 2008). We consider these factors in more detail below.

Although poll worker retention is high, there is always a need for more poll workers. Consequently, experienced and inexperienced poll workers must work together each election (Stein et al., 2025). These recurring (experienced) poll workers have institutional knowledge of the voting process that has been acquired over multiple election cycles. On the upside, those who have worked as poll workers in the past know the expectations, responsibilities, and rhythm associated with the voting process. They also have experience with the application of the rules and laws, and they know what improves productivity and efficiency. However, on the downside, experienced poll workers also may have been educated about the process under a different set of rules or different voting equipment and those outdated rules and equipment may stick even when training is updated.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the

experience and expectations are inherently novel for first-time poll workers. Therefore, they come into the election only equipped with the rules and procedures outlined in their training.

A second factor for why experienced poll workers may operate polling sites differently than inexperienced ones is that poll workers function autonomously at their assigned polling locations (Bassi et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2009; Montjoy, 2008). Poll workers have wide latitude to interpret election laws subjectively rather than by established, *de jure* legal precedents. Suttman-Lea's (2020) work, which identifies poll worker personal judgments when verifying voter signatures in Illinois, suggests as much. Suttman-Lea finds that poll workers evaluate mismatched voter signatures based on personal preferences and experience, rather than relying on their training. The findings are based on observations that include instances of poll workers requesting photo identification, even though Illinois does not have a photo ID requirement. Similarly, Atkeson et al. (2014) find that poll workers who ask for voter ID inappropriately do so because they support voter ID policies. Autonomy allows for greater flexibility and variation in implementation, and autonomy with experience creates discretion for poll worker interactions that may lead to added conflict at polling sites.

Scholars have pointed out the authority poll workers have on Election Day (Claassen et al., 2008; Hall et al., 2009) and how this authority may be abused by overzealous or improperly trained poll workers (Bassi et al., 2006; MacDonald & Cain, 2005; Montjoy, 2008). These inconsistencies may be attributable to the street-level bureaucratic role of poll workers in elections, whereby local election officials delegate power to citizen volunteers and hope they follow their training (Lipsky, 1980; Montjoy & Slaton, 2002). Those who have worked in previous elections may be more aware of this autonomy and operate polling sites systematically differently from their inexperienced counterparts. By contrast, new workers who have no prior experience operating polling sites are less aware of the processes and expectations and only have their training, which may not be extensive, to rely upon.

Poll workers also tend to be less educated and older than the communities they serve (Hall & Moore, 2011). These demographic characteristics may have consequences. For example, scholars have documented that poll workers make errors and are prone to some racial biases when working the polls (see Atkeson et al., 2014; Cobb et al., 2012). Recent papers also find that poll worker age and resources influence the quality of the election experience (Coll, 2022; Hostetter, 2022).

## The Short-Term Principal-Agent Theory Problem

Poll workers are street-level bureaucrats who implement policy with limited direct oversight from local election

officials (Alvarez & Hall, 2006). This is a classical short-term principal-agent theory problem between poll workers and LEOs (Mitnick, 1980; Waterman & Meier, 1998), whereby election administrators delegate authority to poll worker volunteers who work long hours for little pay (Lipsky, 1980; Montjoy & Slaton, 2002). The short-term street-level bureaucratic nature of poll workers introduces an interesting wrinkle to the principal-agent theory problem. As poll workers continue to work more elections, over time they transition from short-term to long-term or recurring agents while maintaining their street-level bureaucratic status.

Spencer and Markovits (2010) look at whether experience influences how poll workers operate polling sites by considering efficiency differences between experienced and inexperienced poll workers at the check-in stations. They find that experienced poll workers took an additional 31 seconds to check in voters compared to poll workers with no prior experience. Hostetter (2022) finds similar evidence about the importance of poll worker age on voter wait times. While age is not the same as experience, those who are older are likely to have worked more elections than those who are younger. These are interesting findings because they suggest that the influence of poll worker experience on the voting process may be consequential to polling location operations.

Spencer and Markovits (2010) offer two reasonable explanations for their finding. The first is that election rules change over time, and experienced poll workers may not be able to remember all of the changes. In other words, experienced poll workers may confuse previous election laws and policies with current ones. Indeed, research suggests that experienced election clerks prefer to maintain the legal and institutional status quo (status quo bias) rather than implement new changes (Moynihan & Lavertu, 2012; Moynihan & Silva, 2008) in an attempt to avoid additional administrative burdens (Burden et al., 2012).

The second explanation offered by Spencer and Markovits (2010) is that experienced poll workers are more relaxed at the polling site and may spend time visiting with voters with whom they are friends. This explanation implies that poll workers build relationships with voters and fellow poll workers over time.<sup>5</sup> The relationships Spencer and Markovits (2010) identify suggest a systematic difference between experienced and inexperienced poll worker interactions with voters, and this interaction leads to differences in processing time.

We consider two competing arguments about how experience may influence poll worker behavior beyond those offered by Spencer and Markovits (2010). We argue that experience influences how poll workers operate polling sites, such as encountering conflicts, taking on more poll worker duties, and operating polling machines. However, we remain neutral about which argument is correct.

The first argument, which we call the *institutional knowledge hypothesis*, is that election experience provides poll workers with institutional knowledge to address voter

questions and handle surprises that occur during the voting process. As poll workers volunteer for more elections, they gain experience and institutional knowledge about the voting process. The institutional knowledge argument suggests that experience leads to a more informed and prepared poll worker who can address voter needs, follow election laws, and operate the polling site at a high level. In this context, poll worker experience is beneficial to the voting process because experienced poll workers may lessen the need for LEO oversight. With experience, the agents (poll workers) may begin to more accurately reflect the wishes of the principal (LEOs). In this principal-agent dichotomy, experienced poll workers learn over time how to operate polling sites and interact with election actors such as poll watchers, voters, and other poll workers. This leads to the first hypothesis:

*Institutional Knowledge Hypothesis (H1):* As poll worker experience increases, poll workers will report being (a) more prepared to work the polls and (b) less likely to encounter election problems.

The second argument, which we call the *personal preferences hypothesis*, is that experienced poll workers may rely on personal perspectives and biases related to their previous experiences rather than their training, and scholars have found evidence of this in recent elections (Atkeson et al. 2010, 2014; Suttman-Lea, 2020). With experience may come the perspective that poll workers are knowledgeable about the voting process and therefore do not need to consult or follow their training when dealing with voters, poll watchers, or other inexperienced poll workers. Experience may instead provide a *false* sense of institutional knowledge that leads to less informed and prepared poll workers who encounter more election problems.

Experience also increases the likelihood that poll workers will encounter election administrative burdens, which occur when administrators are faced with changing policies that are onerous (Burden et al., 2012). For example, Glaser et al. (2007) find in their survey of California poll workers that those who have worked many elections tend to “have a hard time adjusting to new procedures, equipment, and changes in the law, and tend to get stuck in a ‘rut’ doing the work the same way it has always been done” (pg. 8). This is further supported in their analysis of election experience on electoral satisfaction. They find that as poll worker election experience increases, satisfaction with the Election Day process decreases. This may also help to explain Hostetter’s (2022) recent finding that older poll workers take longer to check voters in to vote.

By contrast, inexperienced poll workers lack a frame of reference with which to compare past elections to present ones. Given that inexperienced poll workers are inherently unable to rely on past elections to make decisions, they must rely more heavily on their training compared to their more experienced counterparts. As they gain experience, however, the agents (poll workers) may begin to ignore the training and wishes of the principal (LEOs). In this principal-agent

dichotomy, the experienced agent increasingly follows personal preferences, biases, or experiences rather than their training. This leads to the second hypothesis:

*Personal Preferences Hypothesis (H2):* As poll worker experience increases, poll workers will report being (a) more prepared to work the polls and (b) more likely to encounter election problems.

In both the institutional knowledge and personal preference hypotheses, we expect that poll worker experience leads to more preparation to work the polls. However, in the personal preference hypothesis, we expect poll workers to encounter more election problems compared to the institutional knowledge hypothesis. Therefore, the institutional knowledge and personal preference hypotheses may overlap when it comes to preparedness. Finally, it may be that experience matters little in these environments and that both the training and autonomy impact poll workers similarly. Therefore, we also offer a third hypothesis that suggests that as poll worker experience increases, it will not affect their preparedness to work the polls or their election experience.

## Data and Method of Analysis

Election statutes limit the application of experimental methods to study election administration generally and poll workers specifically. The data available to test our hypotheses are also limited. To our knowledge, there is only one national survey that asks poll workers about their training and behavior as election workers, the number of elections they have worked in the past, and their assigned duties on Election Day. This project requires all three factors to test the two competing hypotheses. For these reasons, we use the 2022 national poll worker survey implemented across 10 states in 19 jurisdictions (Stein et al., 2025).

This survey provides us with several vital pieces of information. First, the survey asks poll workers how many years of poll worker experience they have. Second, the survey asks questions about poll worker duties and experiences on Election Day. Third, the survey includes the demographic information that we require as controls. The surveys were administered online to poll workers across a variety of jurisdictions before the November 2022 general election in two separate waves. Those surveyed had worked at least one election between November 2020 and November 2022. The jurisdictions surveyed are distributed across important demographic characteristics such as urban and rural, Republican and Democratic, and geographic areas in the United States (see Table A1 in the Appendix). The survey asked poll workers about their training, any conflicts or problems they encountered, and their experience working the polls.

We use the 2022 national poll worker survey because it provides several questions about poll worker training attitudes, and their self-reported behavior on Election Day that we use as dependent variables. We rely on three sets of models. The first is attitudes towards poll workers' ability to

do their jobs successfully, which were asked on the training survey. These include how training prepared the poll workers to do their jobs, solve problems, and whether the instructions were clear. The second set of models examines the actual behavior of poll workers on Election Day, including whether the poll worker experienced conflict with poll watchers, voters, or other poll workers, and experienced difficulty with the voting machines. The third set of models aggregates the total number of conflicts that poll workers experienced and the duties they performed. For the sake of brevity, a detailed description of each dependent variable is available in Table A2 in the Appendix.

The main predictor variable of interest is poll worker experience. *Experience* is a categorical variable representing the number of years that a poll worker has worked. For the linear models (Tables 2 and 3), we coded *Experience* (0) for 1 Year (19%), (1) for 2–5 Years (48%), (2) for 6–10 Years (16%), and (3) for 11+ Years (17%) for easier interpretation. For the ordered logit models, we keep *Experience* as a categorical variable.

In the training stage, new poll workers have only the training on which to base their expectations for Election Day, and therefore we expect that experience should be positively related to perceived abilities. For the behavioral models, given our competing hypotheses, we expect a relationship between experience and the dependent variables, but we do not argue a direction for them, since experience may lead to poll workers being more or less likely to experience conflict and other administrative problems.

We also consider several individual-level controls that may influence poll worker responses on training and behavior: age, gender, race, number of hours worked, and fixed effects for jurisdictions. *Age* is the self-reported age of the poll worker (mean = 59), and *Gender* includes whether the poll worker self-reported as Male (32.6%,  $N = 1,291$ ), Female (66%,  $N = 2,625$ ), or Other (1.4%,  $N = 57$ ). *Race* is categorical and includes White (77.4%,  $N = 3,073$ ), Asian (1.3%,  $N = 52$ ), Black (13%,  $N = 519$ ), Latino (3.9%,  $N = 155$ ), and Other (4.4%,  $N = 172$ ), with White as the baseline (comparison) group.<sup>6</sup> We also controlled for the county or jurisdiction of the poll worker with fixed effects. *Jurisdiction* is categorical, and a list of jurisdictions from the survey is included in Table A1 in the Appendix along with the response rates.

## Results

We first report the results of poll worker experience on self-reported training preparation in Table 1 below. This allows us to see how poll worker experience influences self-reported perceptions of preparedness to work the election. We find evidence that experienced poll workers are more likely to report that they agree with the sentiment that their training prepared them to work as poll workers. Table 1 shows that all levels of *Experience* are positive and statistically significant for poll workers self-reporting that they were prepared to

serve as an election worker, solve any problems experienced as a poll worker, and received clear instructions during training relative to the baseline (comparison) group of poll workers with only 1 year of experience, controlling for all other factors in the model.

We include marginal probabilities in Figure 1 below to show the relationship between poll worker experience and the model outputs from Table 1 for easier interpretation. For plotting purposes only, we aggregated responses from poll workers who self-reported “whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree, or Don’t Know” to each of the three questions and pooled the results into “Agree” and “Disagree” and dropped “Don’t Know” from the plot.<sup>7</sup> We used an ordered logit regression for each of the models.

In Figure 1, the probability of a poll worker agreeing that they are adequately prepared to serve as a poll worker in any election increases as poll worker experience increases (84% to 94%) by 10 percentage points, moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ years. By contrast, the probability of a poll worker disagreeing that they are adequately prepared

to serve as a poll worker in any election decreases as poll worker experience increases (12% to 4%) by 67% or 8% points, moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ years. This suggests that more experienced poll workers self-reported more preparation to work the election relative to their inexperienced colleagues.

The effects of self-reporting that training was in-depth enough to solve any problems that poll workers may experience are in the same direction and just as substantively strong. The probability of a poll worker agreeing that training prepared poll workers to solve problems increases as poll worker experience increases (74% to 88%) by 14% points, moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ years. Once again, there is a decline in the probability of disagreement with the outcome as experience increases. Poll workers disagreeing that they are prepared to solve problems decreases as poll worker experience increases (22% to 10%) by 56% or 12% points, moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ years.

Finally, when poll workers were asked whether they were given clear instructions on what was expected of them, the probability of agreeing increased (85% to 96%) by 11%, or 11% points, moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ years. There is also a decline in the probability that a poll worker self-reports disagreeing that they were given clear instructions on what was expected of them, moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ years (11% to 3%).

When we take all of the evidence from Table 1 and Figure 1 together, self-reporting preparedness to work an election increases as years of experience increase. This lends support to the first parts of the institutional knowledge and personal preference hypotheses. The results suggest that experienced poll workers report being more prepared to work elections, and we argue this is because of their years of experience operating polling sites as poll workers. With experience, the uncertainties of what a poll worker will encounter at the polls decrease, which may, in turn, boost their confidence in their training and their self-reported readiness to work the election. Indeed, it seems that as poll workers gain more experience, they report feeling more prepared for the election and the various problems that will arise.

Now we shift from self-reported preparedness to self-reported poll worker behavior. This allows us to see how the election experience influences poll worker *actions* rather than their perceived preparation for the polling site. We use this as an opportunity to look at the role of experience beyond just how a poll worker interprets their training or preparedness.

In Table 2, we report the results of poll worker experience on behavior. We turned all of the dependent variables in Table 2 into binary indicators, simplified the coding of *Experience* into a 4-point numerical scale, and used a linear model for easier interpretation of the results.<sup>8</sup> Poll worker *Experience* is statistically significant using two-tailed tests for three of the four dependent variables in Table 2, controlling

**Table 1.** Ordered Logit Regression of Poll Worker Experience on Self-Reported Training Experience

|                  | Prepared            | Solve Problems      | Clear Instructions  |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Experience level |                     |                     |                     |
| 2-5 Years        | 1.094***<br>(0.153) | 0.732***<br>(0.111) | 1.366***<br>(0.181) |
| 6-10 Years       | 1.692***<br>(0.287) | 1.050***<br>(0.170) | 1.306***<br>(0.284) |
| 11+ years        | 1.287***<br>(0.245) | 1.078***<br>(0.170) | 1.417***<br>(0.289) |
| Age              | 0.008*<br>(0.004)   | 0.008**<br>(0.003)  | 0.009**<br>(0.005)  |
| Demographics     |                     |                     |                     |
| Female           | -0.048<br>(0.143)   | -0.075<br>(0.099)   | 0.050<br>(0.165)    |
| Other            | -1.069*<br>(0.467)  | -0.196<br>(0.425)   | -0.484<br>(0.553)   |
| Asian            | 0.790<br>(0.738)    | -0.249<br>(0.345)   | -0.140<br>(0.621)   |
| Black            | 0.329<br>(0.238)    | 0.637***<br>(0.171) | 0.186<br>(0.268)    |
| Latino           | 0.107<br>(0.339)    | 0.287<br>(0.243)    | -0.101<br>(0.373)   |
| Other            | -0.012<br>(0.326)   | 0.359<br>(0.264)    | -0.302<br>(0.345)   |
| Cutpoint 1       | -1.880              | -0.923              | -2.233              |
| Cutpoint 2       | -1.546              | -0.694              | -1.865              |
| N                | 3,852               | 3,852               | 3,852               |

Note. For the sake of brevity, jurisdiction fixed effects are excluded from being reported in the table above but are included in the models. Two-tailed test of significance with standard errors reported in parentheses where #p < 0.10; \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001.

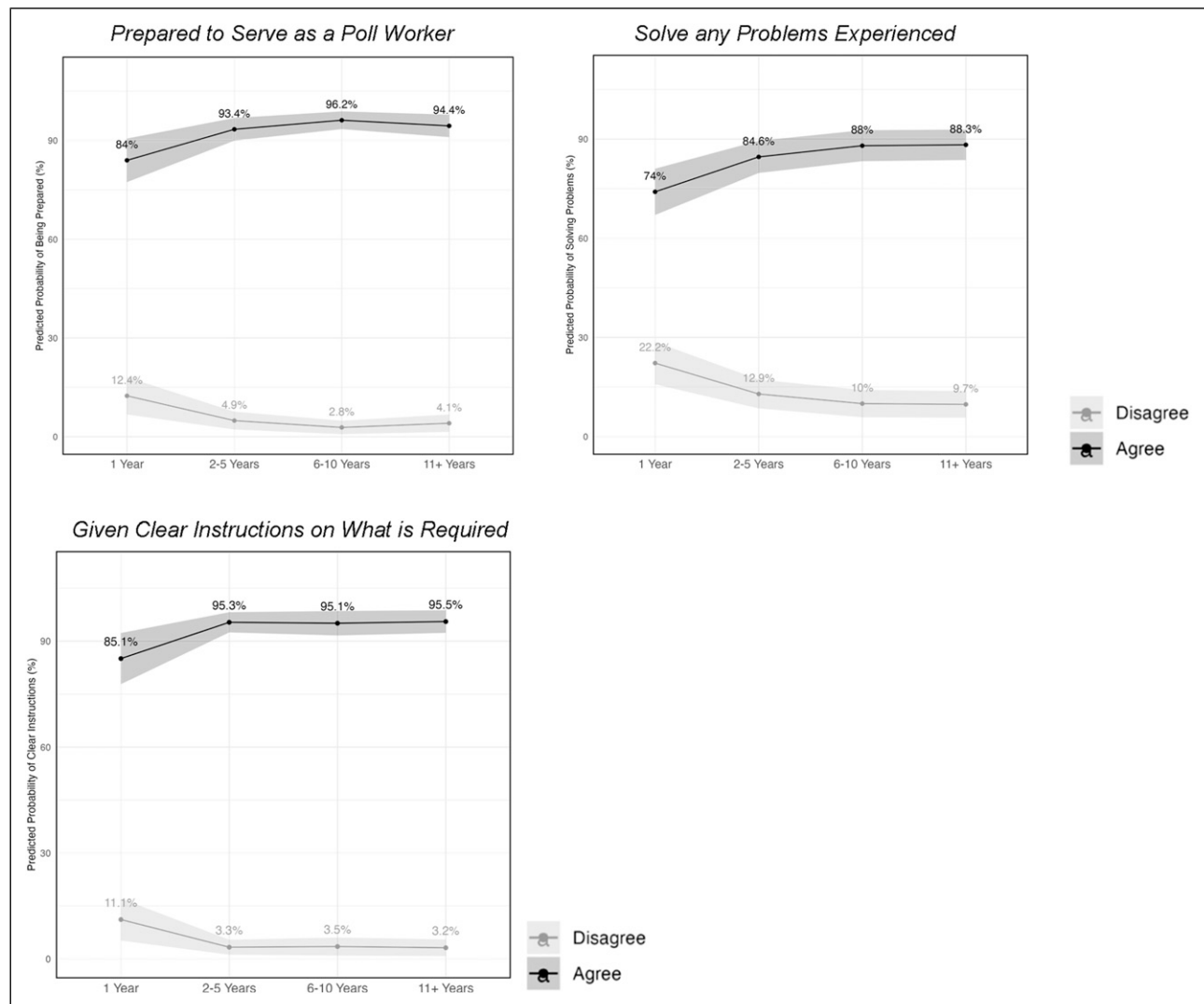


**Figure 1.** Predicted Probability of Poll Worker Experience With 95% CIs by Self-Reported

for all other factors in the model. The lone exception is that more experienced poll workers were not any more or less likely to self-report experiencing conflicts with other poll workers relative to their less experienced colleagues (Column 3,  $b = 0.007$ ;  $p = .18$ ). Although it is important to note that the coefficient is directionally positive. While it is good news that experienced poll workers did not report more conflicts with other poll workers at traditionally statistically significant levels, we did find that experienced poll workers reported increased conflicts with poll watchers and voters, in addition to reporting more difficulties with voting machines. We include marginal probabilities in Figure 2 below for all four models from Table 2 to show the effects of experience on the dependent variables.

In Figure 2, the probability that a poll worker with 1 year of election experience reported conflict with a poll watcher (7%) is lower than those who have worked 6–10 years (10%) or 11+ years (10%). Put another way, experienced poll workers are

more likely to self-report experiencing conflict with poll watchers compared to their less experienced counterparts. Moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ elections increases the probability that a poll worker will report conflict with a poll watcher by almost 30%.

The effect in column 2 of Table 2 between poll worker experience and conflict with voters is also statistically significant. The probability that a poll worker with 1 year of election experience reported conflict with a poll watcher (7%) is slightly lower than those who have worked 2–5 years (8%), 6–10 years (7%), or 11+ years (9%). Moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ elections increases the probability that a poll worker will report conflict with a voter by a modest 8%.<sup>9</sup>

The effects are statistically insignificant between poll worker experience and conflict with other poll workers. The probability that a poll worker with 1 year of election experience reported conflict with another poll worker (5.4%) is

**Table 2.** Linear Regression of Poll Worker Experience on Self-Reported Conflicts and Difficulties Encountered

|                         | Poll Watcher Conflict | Voter Conflict        | Poll Worker Conflict | Machine Difficulty  |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Experience level        |                       |                       |                      |                     |
| Experience              | 0.020***<br>(0.005)   | 0.201***<br>(0.006)   | 0.007<br>(0.005)     | 0.030***<br>(0.007) |
| Demographics            |                       |                       |                      |                     |
| Age                     | −0.001***<br>(0.0003) | −0.003***<br>(0.0003) | −0.0005<br>(0.0003)  | −0.001<br>(0.0004)  |
| Female                  | −0.008<br>(0.010)     | −0.004<br>(0.010)     | 0.014<br>(0.009)     | −0.022<br>(0.013)   |
| Other                   | −0.065<br>(0.046)     | 0.057<br>(0.048)      | 0.027<br>(0.041)     | −0.029<br>(0.059)   |
| Asian                   | −0.033<br>(0.040)     | 0.026<br>(0.043)      | −0.014<br>(0.037)    | −0.025<br>(0.052)   |
| Black                   | 0.019<br>(0.014)      | −0.008<br>(0.015)     | 0.008<br>(0.013)     | −0.009<br>(0.018)   |
| Latino                  | 0.011<br>(0.024)      | 0.008<br>(0.026)      | 0.053*<br>(0.022)    | 0.060#<br>(0.031)   |
| Other                   | 0.023<br>(0.025)      | −0.019<br>(0.027)     | 0.014<br>(0.023)     | −0.023<br>(0.032)   |
| N                       | 3,290                 | 3,290                 | 3,290                | 3,290               |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.03                  | 0.03                  | 0.01                 | 0.04                |

Note. For the sake of brevity, jurisdiction fixed effects are excluded from being reported in the table above but are included in the models. Two-tailed test of significance with standard errors reported in parentheses where # $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

lower than those who have worked 2–5 years (5.5%), 6–10 years (5.9%), and 11+ years (6.8%). This represents an increase in the probability that a poll worker will report conflict with another poll worker by 26%. However, recall that the relationship between poll worker experience and conflict with other poll workers is statistically insignificant.

The results for polling machine difficulty at the polling site are substantively stronger than the previous three models. The probability that a poll worker with 1 year of election experience reported difficulty with a voting machine (10%) is lower than those who have worked 2–5 years (12%), 6–10 years (14%), and 11+ years (17%). Moving from 1 year of election experience to 11+ elections increases the probability that a poll worker will self-report difficulty with a voting machine by 76.5%. We find this a bit surprising given that voting machines do not change much. One would think that more experience would lead to fewer reported problems with polling machines. However, this is not what we find, and the results are highly substantively and statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

Similar to how inexperienced poll workers have no prior election experience to rely upon when dealing with voters, poll watchers, or other poll workers, they also have no context of how a polling site operates or the potential difficulties that are likely to occur. Further, neither being prepared to work the election nor having years of experience means the polling site will operate without conflict.

Experienced poll workers may self-report more conflict with poll watchers and voters because of the very experience

and institutional knowledge they have acquired working the elections over the years. This suggests that our institutional knowledge hypothesis may be working in reverse of our theoretical expectations and in conjunction with our personal preference hypothesis. By this, we mean that experienced poll workers, drawing on their years of managing and working polling sites, may infuse personal bias into decision-making (Atkeson et al., 2014; Bassi et al., 2006; MacDonald & Cain, 2005; Montjoy, 2008; Suttman-Lea, 2020), which can lead to more conflicts with other election actors. By contrast, inexperienced poll workers might defer more readily to voters and poll watchers when disagreements arise. Thus, a decrease in the quality of the voting experience may come from a poll worker's institutional knowledge that they have acquired over years of experience, which increases personal bias when making decisions.

Further, given that the polling leaders are often recruited from the established pool of poll workers, it is likely that part of the institutional training poll workers receive comes from the inaccurate observations they have witnessed from their more experienced peers. Thus, the cycle likely continues as some experienced poll workers make polarizing decisions and pass that behavior down to rank-and-file poll workers who later become leaders of polling sites.

This leads us to consider the possibility that conflict is a function of the number of duties that poll workers perform. Put another way, we may find that experienced poll workers are given more responsibilities, and with added responsibility comes more opportunities for conflict. The national poll

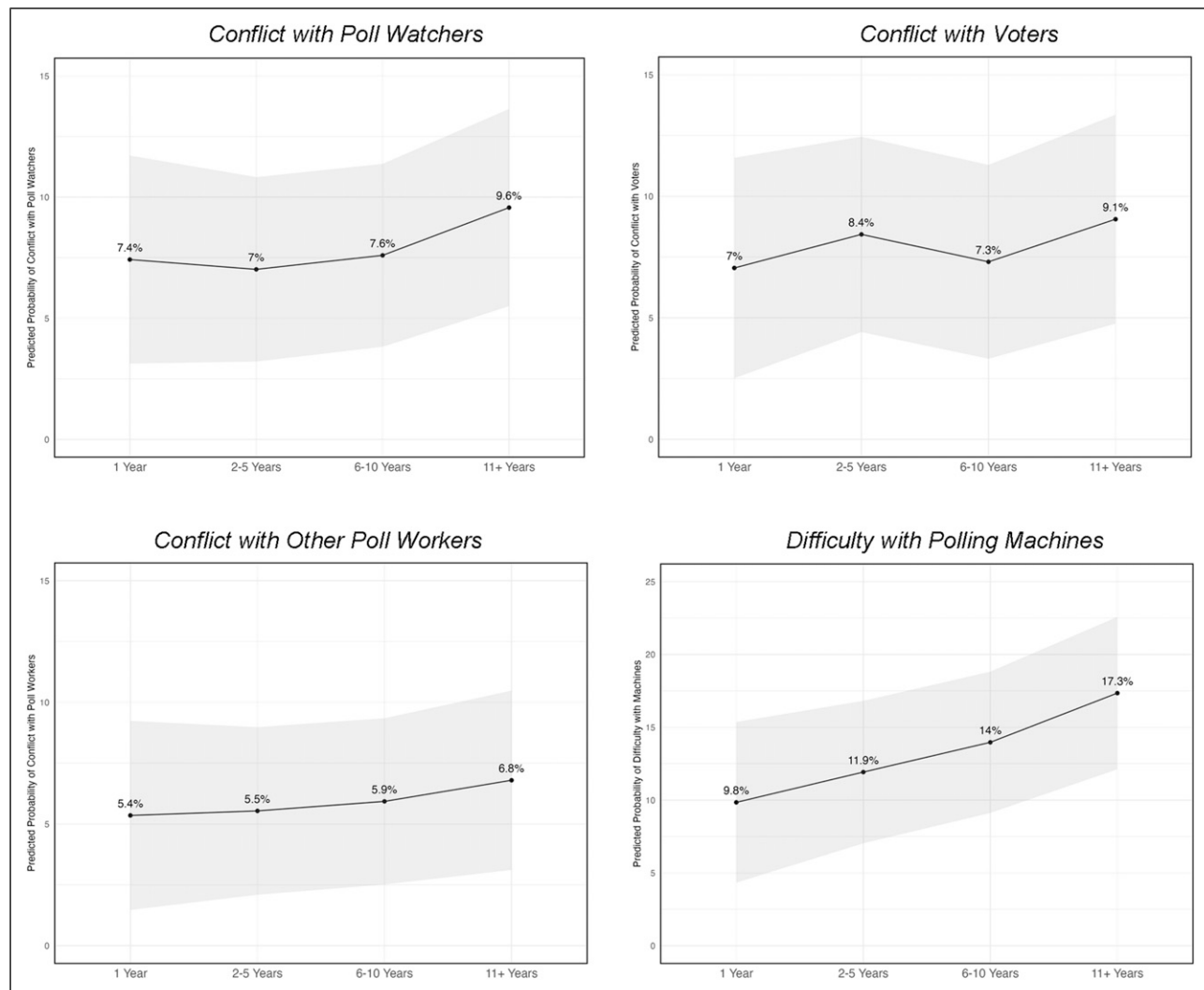


**Figure 2.** Predicted Probability of Poll Worker Experience With 95% CIs by Self-Reported Experience of

worker survey indicates that the mean number of self-reported duties for poll workers with 1 year of experience is 1.6. Importantly, this doubles for poll workers with 2–5 years of experience to 3.3 and remains fairly consistent until 11+ years, when poll workers self-report performing a mean of 4 duties, rising slightly with each additional year of poll worker experience. These survey results suggest that in a poll worker's first year, the number of duties is roughly half that of the other poll workers. The increase in duties performed may be a function of becoming polling judges or other high-ranking position at the polling site.

In Table 3, we aggregate the total number of self-reported duties. We use a linear model to test the relationship between experience and duties. There are strong substantive and statistical effects between poll worker experience and self-reported duties. In Table 3, poll worker *Experience* is correlated with the total number of self-reported duties ( $b = 0.797$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed) controlling for all other factors in the model. When we plot the marginal probabilities in

Figure 3, we find that moving from 1 year of election experience (2.2) to 11+ years (4.5) doubles the number of duties poll workers take on at polling sites. This represents a 105% increase in total duties performed.

Given our findings in Table 3, which suggest that duties may be an intervening variable, we rerun our model and include duties as an independent variable to determine if the correlation between experience and our dependent variable remains, is reduced, or eliminated, and to estimate the direct effects on our dependent variables in Table 4. We find a relatively small reduction in the effect size for experience in three of the four models (poll watcher conflict, poll worker conflict, and machine difficulty) of between 0.005 and 0.04, but experience remains significant in the two models, poll watcher conflict and machine difficulty, at the same level as they did in Model 2. There was a larger reduction for voter conflict, which was reduced by 0.19 but the measure again remains statistically significant. Thus, experience still matters to poll worker performance.

**Table 3.** Linear Regression of Poll Worker Experience on Self-Reported Number of Duties Performed

|                         | Duties               |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Experience level        |                      |
| Experience              | 0.797***<br>(0.037)  |
| Demographics            |                      |
| Age                     | -0.023***<br>(0.002) |
| Female                  | -0.133#<br>(0.070)   |
| Other                   | -0.270<br>(0.321)    |
| Asian                   | -0.011<br>(0.283)    |
| Black                   | -0.039<br>(0.101)    |
| Latino                  | 0.249<br>(0.175)     |
| Other                   | 0.265<br>(0.175)     |
| N                       | 3,866                |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.21                 |

Note. For the sake of brevity, jurisdiction fixed effects are excluded from being reported in the table above but are included in the models. Two-tailed test of significance with standard errors reported in parentheses where # $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Number of duties is also statistically significant in all of the models, although only at the  $p = .10$  level in the model for poll watcher conflict. We note that it is also statistically significant in the poll worker conflict model where the effect size for experience is very close to zero and insignificant (see Table 2). Thus, experience and number of duties performed are both relevant to understanding poll worker performance. We show the predicted probabilities for the number of duties performed by self-reported conflicts and difficulties in Figure 4.<sup>10</sup>

In Figure 4, the probability that a poll worker with 1 duty reported conflict with a poll watcher (6%) is lower than those who have 7 duties (8.7%). Put another way, poll workers with more self-reported duties are more likely to self-report experiencing conflict with poll watchers compared to their colleagues with fewer duties. Moving from 1 duty to 7 duties increases the probability that a poll worker will report conflict with a poll watcher by 45%.

The effect in column 2 of Table 4 between poll worker experience and conflict with voters is also statistically significant. The probability that a poll worker with 1 duty reported conflict with a poll watcher (6.3%) is lower than those who have 6 duties (10.4%). Moving from 1 duty to 6 duties performed increases the probability that a poll worker will report conflict with a voter by 65%.

The effects are statistically significant between number of duties performed and conflict with other poll workers in

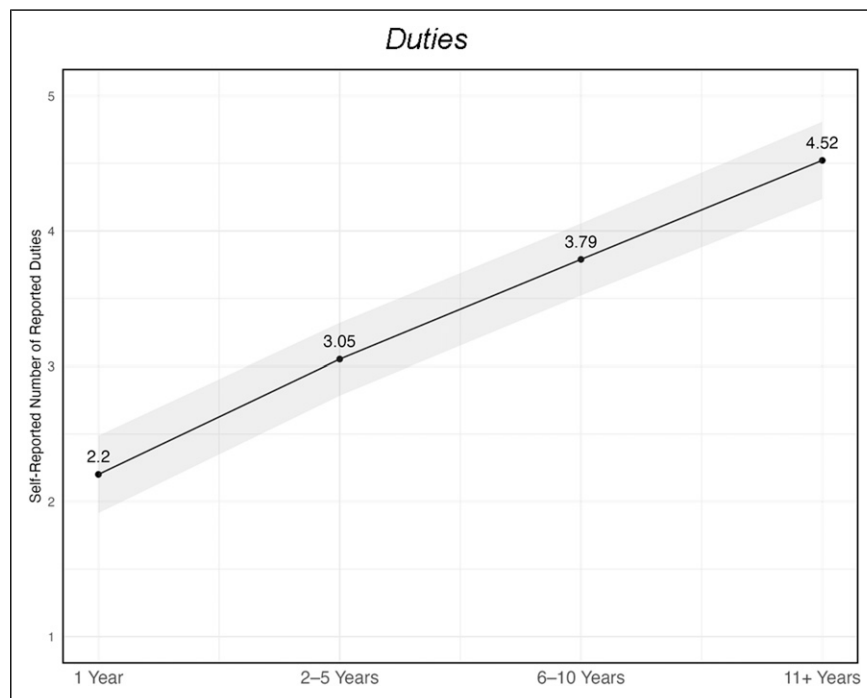
**Figure 3.** Poll Worker Experience by Total Self-Reported

**Table 4.** Linear Regression of Poll Worker Experience and Number of Duties Performed on Self-Reported Conflicts and Difficulties Encountered

|                         | Poll Watcher Conflict | Voter Conflict        | Poll Worker Conflict | Machine Difficulty  |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Experience level        |                       |                       |                      |                     |
| Experience              | 0.017**<br>(0.006)    | 0.015*<br>(0.006)     | 0.003<br>(0.005)     | 0.025***<br>(0.007) |
| Number of duties        |                       |                       |                      |                     |
| Duties                  | 0.004#<br>(0.003)     | 0.011***<br>(0.003)   | 0.008***<br>(0.002)  | 0.012***<br>(0.003) |
| Demographics            |                       |                       |                      |                     |
| Age                     | -0.001***<br>(0.0003) | -0.003***<br>(0.0003) | -0.0003<br>(0.0003)  | -0.0004<br>(0.0004) |
| Female                  | -0.006<br>(0.010)     | -0.001<br>(0.010)     | 0.016<br>(0.009)     | -0.018<br>(0.013)   |
| Other                   | -0.063<br>(0.046)     | 0.061<br>(0.048)      | 0.030<br>(0.041)     | -0.024<br>(0.059)   |
| Asian                   | -0.033<br>(0.040)     | 0.026<br>(0.043)      | -0.013<br>(0.036)    | -0.024<br>(0.052)   |
| Black                   | 0.020<br>(0.014)      | -0.007<br>(0.015)     | 0.008<br>(0.013)     | -0.009<br>(0.018)   |
| Latino                  | 0.009<br>(0.024)      | 0.003<br>(0.026)      | 0.050*<br>(0.022)    | 0.054#<br>(0.031)   |
| Other                   | 0.021<br>(0.025)      | -0.024<br>(0.027)     | 0.010<br>(0.022)     | -0.029<br>(0.032)   |
| N                       | 3,290                 | 3,290                 | 3,290                | 3,290               |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.03                  | 0.04                  | 0.01                 | 0.04                |

Note. For the sake of brevity, jurisdiction fixed effects are excluded from being reported in the table above but are included in the models. Two-tailed test of significance with standard errors reported in parentheses where # $p < .10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

column 3 of Table 4, unlike experience. The probability that a poll worker with 1 duty reported conflict with another poll worker (4%) is lower than those with 8 duties (9.9%). This finding suggests that the number of self-reported conflicts with other poll workers more than doubles as the number of duties performed increases, representing an increase in the probability that a poll worker will report conflict with a poll worker by 148%.

Finally, Figure 4 shows that the probability that a poll worker with 1 duty reported difficulty with a voting machine (9.8%) is lower than those with 7 duties (18.3%). Moving from 1 duty performed to 8 duties increases the probability that a poll worker will self-report difficulty with a voting machine by 86.7%. Unlike with experience, this is unsurprising given that more duties for poll workers means more responsibilities and likely running around the polling site.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Are poll workers with election experience better street-level bureaucrats than their inexperienced counterparts? The answer proposed in the present paper is mixed. In general, it seems that experienced poll workers self-report that they are more prepared to work the election than those who have little election experience. However, when we look at poll worker

actions, we find that some experienced poll workers will report more conflicts with voters and poll watchers, and increased difficulty operating polling machines than their less experienced colleagues. This is probably because they are polling judges or in some form of leadership position at the polling site.

Although we do not have a direct measure for leadership roles, we were able to control for the number of duties performed, which is perhaps a proxy for leadership since poll judges are likely to be involved in many more tasks than poll clerks. When we consider the number of duties that poll workers are assigned, it may be that poll worker experience is only a piece of the street-level bureaucratic puzzle, as we find that the number of duties has an independent effect on poll worker performance but does not eliminate the direct effects of experience. The findings of this paper suggest that as poll workers gain more election experience and as they are assigned additional tasks, poll worker and polling place performance decreases.

Scholars have pointed to the status quo bias of poll workers as an attempt to avoid administrative burdens (Burden et al., 2012; Moynihan & Lavertu, 2012; Moynihan & Silva, 2008). The results in the present paper suggest that maintaining the status quo may also be an attempt to maximize efficiency given the number of duties that experienced

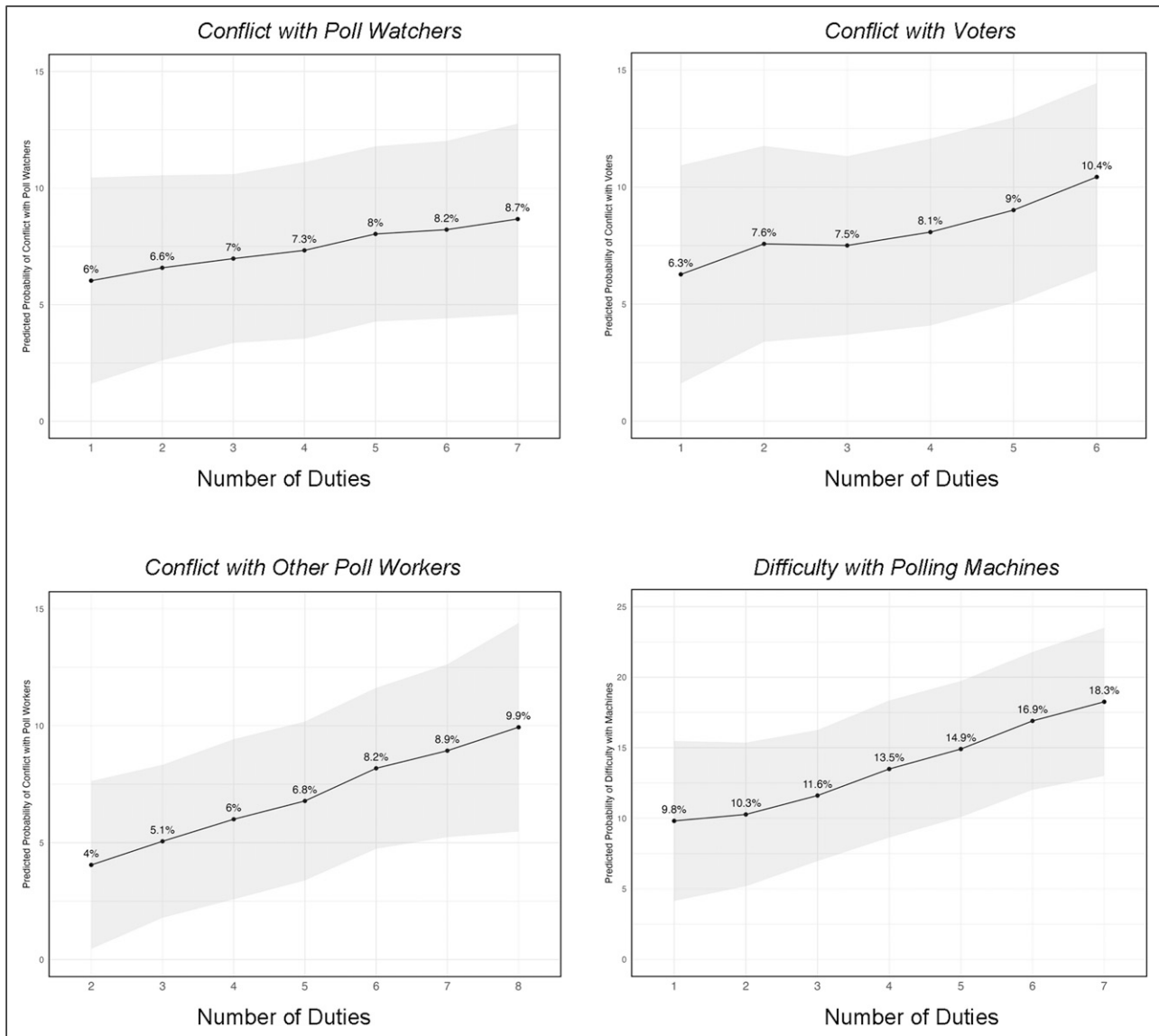


**Figure 4.** Predicted Probability of Number of Poll Worker Duties With 95% CIs by Self-Reported Experience of

poll workers are assigned relative to their less experienced colleagues. While previous research has pointed to street-level bureaucrats making decisions based on their personal preferences (Atkeson et al., 2010; Suttman-Lea, 2020), we infer that these personal decisions may lead to additional conflicts and problems at the polling site and for voters, poll watchers, and other poll workers.

There are several important theoretical implications beyond policy applications for local election officials. Given that poll workers influence the legitimacy of and confidence in the electoral process (Hall et al., 2009), having highly trained and confident poll workers may lead to better interactions with voters. In this context, having experienced poll workers is beneficial to the local election official and may result in increased feelings of individual voter confidence (Atkeson, 2014; Atkeson & Saunders, 2007; Claassen et al.,

2008). At the same time, these experienced poll workers may be overworked and sometimes behave in a manner that jeopardizes voter and polling place experiences.

With the scarcity of poll workers in the United States (Burden & Milyo, 2015; Hostetter, 2020; Hostetter & Liz Lebron, 2024), some local election officials may have to choose between staffing precincts with (1) recurring poll workers who possess high institutional knowledge of the voting process and who may sometimes make decisions that leads to conflict or (2) new poll workers who lack confidence in their training but may perform equally well (or better) as poll workers with more experience.

The findings in the present paper shed new light on how and why some polling locations operate in a way that increases the legitimacy of and confidence in the electoral process (Hall et al., 2009) while others do not. This suggests

that LEOs should focus more on balancing the workload assigned to poll workers to ensure consistent operating procedures across voting sites—an especially challenging task for understaffed locations throughout the United States. Indeed, it is likely that more poll workers would help to solve many of the challenges election administrators face.<sup>11</sup>

## ORCID iD

Joshua D. Hostetter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5785-0626>

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2021 Election Sciences, Reform, and Administration conference.
2. GAO estimates that 51% of county local election officials nationwide struggle to fill poll worker positions (2001, pp. 158–160).
3. We generalize polling sites, precincts, and vote centers and use the location names interchangeably throughout the remainder of the paper. This is an important point because Jones and Stein (2021) find that poll worker recruitment is easier in jurisdictions with vote centers relative to those without. Further research is needed to determine whether poll worker quality varies between jurisdictions with and without vote centers. Given the smaller number of poll workers needed in most vote center environments overall poll worker quality may be relatively higher.
4. Election rule changes happen frequently across elections.
5. Scholars have documented that one of the leading reasons why poll workers volunteer is to be “with people I enjoy” (Magleby et al., 2008).
6. Poll workers are on average disproportionately more white and female than the average population (Hall and Moore, 2011).
7. Results are similar for each of the models when the dependent variables are measured as 5-point scales. We combined categories for simpler interpretation of the results. It is important to highlight that all five categories, including the “Don’t Know” response category, were still included in the Table 1 regression models. Results from a model with Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree can be found in Table A6 in the Appendix with “Don’t Know” excluded.
8. The results are similar to using a binary logit regression. The dependent variables in each of the four columns are coded (1) if the poll worker reported experiencing the issue and (0) otherwise. *Experience* maintains the same levels as the ordered logit coding scheme but ranges from 0 to 3.
9. The distribution for voters self-reporting conflict with voters by experience is 1 Year ( $n = 33$ ), 2–5 Years ( $n = 147$ ), 6–10 Years ( $n = 53$ ), and 11+ Years ( $n = 51$ ).
10. The distribution of the number of duties performed varies by self-reported conflicts and difficulties in Table 4 and Figure 4. We plot results with enough power for the regression model. Therefore, the x-axis in Figure 4 shows a maximum self-reported duties performed between six and eight.
11. Hostetter and Liz Lebron (2024) attempt to address the poll worker shortage by recruiting and mobilizing more poll workers using two field experiments with local election officials in Charleston, South Carolina.

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