

Path to the Polls: A Study of How Poll Workers Become Poll Workers

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Abstract

Poll workers are responsible for the street-level implementation of American elections. The democratic process could not take place without them, as they are responsible for confirming voter eligibility, checking in voters once eligibility is confirmed, providing accommodations for voters with special needs, and assisting voters with any other logistical or technical issues in the process of casting their ballot. As they have so much responsibility, they also exercise considerable degrees of discretion in the process of voting. This makes it all the more remarkable that social scientists know little about who they are or where they come from. In an original study, we survey over 5000 poll workers in 19 counties across 10 states to examine the path to the polls for election workers. We test hypotheses examining pathways through impersonal pathways, such as media and outreach efforts by local elections offices, as well as through personal pathways, such as personal recruitment. We find that experienced poll workers were more likely to be recruited via personal pathways such as individual recruitment. New and inexperienced poll workers were more likely to have learned about becoming a poll worker through impersonal means such as media and official outreach. African American poll workers were more likely to report having been personally recruited or learned about being a poll worker through talking to people, regardless of their level experience.

Keywords

elections, election administration, American politics, political behavior

Poll workers are the street-level bureaucrats responsible for the on-the-ground implementation of elections (see [Kimball & Kropf, 2006](#); [Burden et al., 2012](#); [Atkeson et al., 2014](#); [Suttman-Lea, 2020](#); [Barsky, 2020](#)). Elections could not take place without them, as they are responsible for confirming voter eligibility, checking in voters once eligibility is confirmed, providing accommodations for voters with special needs, as well as providing technical and logistical assistance to voters. In some jurisdictions, they are responsible for checking photo identification, verifying voter signatures, and counting the actual ballots. Because they have so much responsibility, they may exercise considerable degrees of discretion in the process of voting. This fact makes it remarkable that political scientists know so little about who poll workers are, their motivations, or how they became poll workers in the first place. How do poll workers become poll workers? Are they recruited or do they seek out opportunities? Are the motivations of people to work the polls related to ways poll workers are recruited? Are the different pathways to working the polls consequential to the makeup of the cadre of poll workers?

These questions should be of significance to scholars. One of the few things we know about poll workers is that they are greatly unrepresentative of the public ([Burden & Milyo,](#)

[2015](#)). Scholars and elections administrators interested in creating equitably accessible elections should be interested in recruiting poll workers that resemble the voters they serve. Representation in bureaucracy has been shown to yield desirable outcomes in other areas of public administration. The passive and active presence of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities within bureaucracy has been shown to result in positive and more equitable outcomes in various local level bureaucratic organizations, such as in education and law enforcement ([Grissom et al., 2009](#); [Park & Favero, 2023](#); [Ricucci et al., 2018](#)). A public sector work force that mirrors the demography of society garners great trust and legitimacy from the public ([Meier, 1975](#)) enhanced policy performance ([Andrews et al., 2014](#); [Groeneveld et al., 2015](#); [Haider-Markel et al., 2000](#); [Meier et al., 1989](#); [Meier & Nigro,](#)

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1976) and more confidence in the conduct and outcome of elections (King & Barnes, 2019).

But where and how should election administrators look for a representative array of poll workers? The key to answering this question could be an examination of how previous and current poll workers found themselves behind the check-in table at their local polling place. In an original survey of poll workers, we surveyed over 5000 poll workers in 19 counties across 10 states. We ask specific questions regarding how they learned about becoming a poll worker, as well as their levels of experience working the polls (including first time poll workers), and various other demographic characteristics.

We examine several hypotheses regarding how citizens find their way to the polling place via *impersonal* media and outreach - such as ads on social media, stories in the news, messages from local elections officials, and elections websites - as well as through *personal* social connections to becoming a poll worker - being personally recruited, learning about opportunities from a group, or through talking to people. We find that a plurality of poll workers reported having learned about becoming a poll worker either through news stories or through talking to people who have worked the polls before. However, the path to the polls differs between poll workers with different levels of experience and of different demographic characteristics. More seasoned poll workers were more likely to report having become a poll worker through personal mechanisms, like being personally recruited into becoming a poll worker and having seen social media ads about poll worker opportunities. Less experienced poll workers were more likely to have become poll workers through impersonal means, like seeing news stories about need for persons to work the polls, receiving messages from local election officials, or by going to an election website. Demographic characteristics also play a role. African Americans overall were more likely to have become poll workers through personal mechanisms such as being personally recruited or by talking with people, rather than through impersonal means, regardless of their levels of experience. Finally, we find that motivations play a role in how poll workers are recruited. Our inquiry and findings identify how the nexus between motivations to work the polls and strategies for recruiting persons to work the polls enhances the presence of underrepresented populations at the polls. We discuss the meaning and implications of these findings for further research, as well as the more practical implications for how election administrators recruit and retain persons to work the polls.

The Role of Poll Workers

When most people think of poll workers, they are likely to think about the logistical implementation of elections and the enforcement of policies made at the state level. However, by virtue of the fact that poll workers are responsible for various interactions with voters at polling places, implementation of

election procedures are often subject to their considerable degree of discretion. For example, in jurisdictions that require matching signatures between voting documents and state records, the process of signature matching is often left to the subjective judgments of the poll workers (Suttman-Lea, 2020). They are also responsible for implementation of voter identification requirements. Research on this process has found that the implementation of voter identification laws is often conditioned on the biases of poll workers, as well as their personal preferences for voter identification laws (Atkeson et al. 2010, 2014).

In addition to facilitating the election process, poll workers do try to provide a better “customer service” experience for the voter. However, there is an ever-present tension in that they do not have the same leeway that agents for private entities may have because they are restricted by state laws. The emotional labor that poll workers may endure as a result of competing instincts both to provide a good voting experience and to uphold the law in a uniform manner could be difficult for poll workers. As Clark et al. (2023) note, “while members of the public can act or react in any way they choose, citizen agents of the state are not free to do the same; this tension between what they feel and what they can express is part of the process of emotive work” (pp. 312). Consequently, poll workers occupy a unique position in which they are agents of the state charged with upholding the law, but also seek to provide a community service.

The affect and demographic characteristics of the poll workers can independently influence the voter experience. King and Barnes (2019) find that African American and Latinx voters were more likely to believe in the integrity of the election and were more confident that their vote would be counted fairly if they interacted with a co-ethnic poll worker. Chen et al. (2021) found that voters had a more negative impression of vote centers, as opposed to precinct polling places, as a result of the perceived lower levels of helpfulness of the poll workers. These findings suggest that poll workers can affect the experiences of voters, making a representative election work force all the more important.

Poll Worker Motivations and Characteristics

Election administrators have reported difficulty in recruiting poll workers for quite some time, with pluralities reporting that recruiting poll workers was “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult” during the 2008, 2010, and 2012 elections (see EAVS; Burden & Milyo, 2015). Some scholars have found that these difficulties positively correlate with district characteristics, such as population size and average age (Burden & Milyo, 2015; Hostetter, 2020; Jones & Stein, 2021). Though these findings come largely from EAVS data, which has been the subject of scrutiny and skepticism (see Greenberger, 2022; Roberts & Greenberger, 2023; Hostetter,

2020; Jones & Stein, 2021), the overall pattern suggests that many election administrators have good reasons to be concerned about poll worker recruitment. They should have an interest in knowing the characteristics of current poll workers, as well as how current poll workers came to their positions, in order to utilize that knowledge for future recruitment efforts.

Previous research provides insight into the demographic composition of poll workers. Burden and Milyo (2015) find that poll workers are not representative of the overall electorate. Poll workers are older (mostly in their 60s and 70s), mostly retired, more likely to have a college degree, more likely to belong to a major political party, more likely to report infrequent use of the internet, and are mostly women. Because poll workers come from such different backgrounds than the overall electorate, election administrators and scholars alike should wonder whether the paths to the polling place are unnecessarily narrow. It is possible that the different pathways to working the polls contributes to the skewed representation of people working the polls.

Scholars have also examined the motivations of poll workers. Barsky (2020) and Clark and James (2023) find that money was a motivator for most poll workers. However, Clark and James (2023) also find that motivations varied more broadly across “solidary, purposive and material” motivations and were conditioned on age and other socioeconomic indicators. Other scholars have also suggested that the motivations are more intrinsic and normative, finding that poll workers are motivated by civic duty and patriotism (Barsky, 2020; Clark et al., 2023; Knoke & Wright-Isak, 1982; McAuliffe, 2009; Perry, 1996; Perry & Wise, 1990). These collective findings suggest that while pay is a key reason why people become poll workers, they may also have secondary motivations that transcend material benefits.

We posit that the paths to the polls, as with many pathways into public service, largely fall into two categories. The first we will call the *personal* path. These types of paths to becoming a poll worker largely occur through information being spread through formal and informal social networks, in which potential poll workers are exposed to information regarding the opportunity through the course of their routine social lives, or they are personally recruited by someone within their social network. These personal recruitment channels might be intentional or merely a side-effect of other social interactions. The second category we will call the *impersonal* path. This category of paths to the polling place involves people being informed of the opportunity to be a poll worker through media exposure or by direct outreach efforts by elections officials. These might include seeing social media ads, news stories on poll worker shortages, or receiving mass mailings or emails from elections administrators. These are decidedly intentional recruitment channels but are also largely impersonal.

We also suspect the reasons people choose to work the polls are closely linked to how they are recruited to the polls. People who share motivations to work the polls are likely to have consequential individual and group associations through

which they may be recruited to work the polls. Co-partisans who often live in the same neighborhoods (Brown & Enos, 2021) are more susceptible to being recruited by fellow partisans through their interpersonal contacts. The interactions among friends and neighbors inevitably lead to shared information about working the polls.

We hypothesize that that personal recruitment to the polls is more effective for people who are motivated to work the polls because of group and inter-personal connections including party affiliation and associations with friends and neighbors. These motivations and modes of recruitment advance the representation of underrepresented populations including younger voters, non-whites, and those new to working the polls.

Impersonal modes of recruitment including news, websites, unsolicited emails and advertisements are likely to attract the attention of persons motivated to work the polls for financial compensation and personal values such as concerns about election integrity and civic duty. These motivations are more product of conscientiousness (Weinschenk, 2014) and less socially determined. The motivations to work the polls are more likely to be activated through impersonal modes of communication that provide people with information about how they can best fulfill their pecuniary needs and values. We hypothesize that impersonal recruitment of persons to the polls have a negligible or negative effect on underrepresented populations working the polls.

Election administrators have an interest in staffing polling places with experienced, qualified, and motivated election workers. The best predictor of whether someone will participate in the future is if they previously work at the polls (Stein et al., 2019). Election administrators often tap into personal networks to recruit potential poll workers and will often rely heavily on retaining people who have previously work the polls. People who also have previous experience with working the polls may also try to recruit those whom they know have previous served at the polls. Social media and digital marketing have significantly enhanced the capacity of local election officials to publicize opportunities to work the polls. Consequently, many institutions have relied less on personal outreach to recruit personnel in recent years, relying more on social media and traditional news outlets to draw people to the work the polls. The COVID pandemic of 2020 may have hampered personal recruitment efforts by election administration offices, exacerbating the trajectory toward more impersonal outreach methods. As a result of the increasing reliance on more impersonal methods of recruitment, the trend may be for newer poll workers to have been recruited through impersonal media and outreach efforts, rather than through more personal paths.

In addition to the natural trajectory towards impersonal outreach recruitment methods, the political environment post-2020 may have exacerbated the effects of impersonal recruitment. The aftermath of the 2020 election results spurred suspicion of election workers among the most devoted

partisans. Elections offices reported receiving threatening messages and phone calls exacerbating safety concerns in elections offices across the country. The resulting headlines covering the threats against election workers sparked concerns amongst election workers that election worker shortages were imminent, and news stories regarding the need for poll workers were prevalent during the summer and early fall of 2022 (Hamilton, 2022; Montellaro, 2022; Niesse, 2022). Though the concerns regarding conspiracy theories about 2020 being a fraudulent election facilitated by corrupt election workers was largely driven by national politics, the ever-increasing nationalization of American politics may have had greater influence on the initiative of citizens to become poll workers in 2022 than in previous years (see Sievert & Banda, 2024). The nationwide threats against election offices, and the reported difficulty of retaining poll workers led to increased media attention about the need for poll workers, and increased outreach by election offices. This informs our first hypothesis:

H1: More experienced poll workers will be more likely to report becoming a poll worker through personal interactions such as being personally recruited or by talking to peers. Less experienced poll workers will report becoming a poll worker through impersonal means, such as ads, outreach, and media.

Information can disseminate through diverse communities via different mechanisms due to different forms of social capital, differently structured social networks, and different levels of connection to media. The different social histories of African American, Latinx, and Asian American communities indicate that people who are ethnic and racial minorities become poll workers through different recruitment mechanism than white poll workers. For example, African Americans are more likely to rely on political discussion in close-knit, everyday spaces and culturally specific media to form their political ideology, develop civic affect, and evaluate community needs (Dawson, 1994; Lacewell-Perry, 2004). African Americans also differ from whites with regard to the unique historic centrality of the church to African American civic life, as well as the church's continued function as a mechanism to reinforce civic norms within African American communities (Dawson, 1994; McKenzie, 2004). African Americans also tend to have lower levels of trust in existing political institutions and are more likely to support institutional change (Avery, 2009).

Latinxs may also differ in their placement within recruitment networks. For example, Latinxs are less likely to discuss politics at all compared to African Americans and non-Latinx whites (Lamb, 2021). Additionally, election administrators may devote fewer election resources to Latinx communities, suppressing the chances for Latinx voters to become exposed to the opportunities to become poll workers (Coll et al., 2024). Finally, the differences in education and

income levels for African Americans, Latinxs, and Asian Americans may lead to different placements in social networks compared to whites (Brady et al., 1995). This informs our second hypothesis:

H2: Paths to the polls will vary based on race/ethnicity and motivation.

Data Collection and Methods

Properly testing our hypotheses requires, individual level data across multi-jurisdictions.

Most insights in the previous literature regarding poll workers come from reporting by elections officials rather than poll workers themselves. To remedy the scant data that exists on poll workers, we collaborated with local elections officials in 10 states and 19 jurisdictions to survey poll workers about their experiences, concerns, and attitudes regarding working the polls.¹ The survey was administered in two waves, before and after the 2022 midterm election. We administered the pre-election survey between September 15 and October 14, 2022. In total, 5761 surveys were submitted in this wave. For this article, we use data from the pre-election survey. All surveys analyzed here were conducted online via email solicitations sent directly to existing poll workers in each jurisdiction. Table 1 shows the counties, number of respondents from each county, and the percentage of the overall responses from each county. While we do not contend that the sample is perfectly representative of poll workers in the U.S., or that it necessarily needs to be so to learn about poll worker recruitment, these jurisdictions represent a diverse geography, in terms of population, political affect, demographic composition, as well as region. Because the draw heavily from some communities (e.g., Harris County, Milwaukee) that might be unique, our statistical analysis reported below includes fixed effects to control for these differences. The fixed effects hold jurisdiction characteristics such as racial composition constant and make use of variation within jurisdictions as leverage for the analysis. Our analysis is weighted for jurisdiction sample size.

It is possible that individuals who completed the survey were disproportionately likely to continue serving as poll workers, perhaps because of their commitment to the job or above average experiences in 2020, skewing the sample toward experienced poll workers. While this kind of selection bias is possible, the EAVS survey of local election officials found that approximately 17% of poll workers were new in 2022.² This rate is quite like the approximately 19% of poll workers we surveyed who did not say they were “very likely” to serve that year.³

As Clark and James note, “Most studies of poll workers have studied specific locations rather than deploy a nationwide random sample (2023:195).” It is difficult to know how well our convenience sample approximates a national sample of U.S. poll workers. Minimally, our sample shows similar

distributions of age, gender, and prior experience working the polls that other researchers studying single states or jurisdictions have reported for their samples of poll workers (e.g., Barsky, 2020; Clark & James, 2023; Suttman-Lee 2020). (See Table A1 in the Appendix).

Another means of assessing the representative of our sample is to compare poll worker responses about problems at the polls with voters' assessment of polling place operations for the same jurisdiction (i.e., county) in comparable election years. We have compiled survey responses to the 2016 and 2020 Survey of the Performance of American Electorate (SPAEE) about polling place experiences and poll worker performance from respondents in 16 of the 18 jurisdictions included in our 2022 survey of poll workers. Our focus is on problems such as long waiting times, voters' difficulties with voting machines and overall performance of poll workers that both voters and poll workers reported. In our sample of jurisdictions, there is significant congruence among voters and poll workers experiences at the polls. (See Table A2 in the Appendix). The exception is voters' difficulty with voting machines with less than 5% of SPAEE respondents reporting problems with voting machines but poll workers in the same jurisdictions reported nearly 14% of voters have some difficulty with voting machines. Voter and poll worker congruence on waiting times (i.e., waiting more than one hour) and poll worker performance are closely aligned in the 16 matched jurisdictions.

Respondents were asked about seven common ways they learned about working the polls. Four pathways to the polls are impersonal and include advertisements, news stories, websites and emails all originating with local election

officials to generate interest in working the polls. Three other pathways to working the polls include inter-personal contacts with advocacy groups (e.g., League of Women Voters, political parties), friends and neighbors, and others who have worked the polls.⁴ Respondents were free to make multiple choices, potentially complicating our identification of unique pathways to the working the polls and differentiating between personal and impersonal ways people learn about working the polls. Responses to the seven questions, however, indicated that a large majority of respondents identified only one pathway to the polls.

In addition to the answer choices, the respondents were also given the option of "Other – Please State." They could then type a free response into a text box. There were 736 free responses written by poll worker respondents out of the total 5761. We reviewed the responses and grouped them based on the content into 18 categories. Tables A7 and A8 in the Appendix show the various categories into which the responses were sorted and gives several examples from the responses to represent the kind of response that would have been sorted into that category.

Table 2 reports the frequency of different ways respondents identified they learned about the working the polls. Two-thirds of respondents identified exactly one pathway to the polls. Only 14% identified two pathways to the polls. Among those who identified two pathways to the polls, 88% identified both pathways as either personal or impersonal.⁵

Respondents were asked "What motivated you to work the polls." Again, respondents were able to make responses to seven common reasons for working the polls including: civic duty, money paid, interest in election, election integrity, voting rights, friends and neighbors and support for a political party. Respondents were also asked "[O]f these reasons which was the most important in becoming a poll worker?" Respondents' answers to this question are treated as their motivation to work the polls.

To measure race, respondents were asked to respond to the statement "Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be." Respondents could select "Black or African American," "White or Caucasian," "Asian," "American Indian/Native American or Alaskan Native," "Native

Table 1. List of Jurisdictions and Respondent Frequency.

County	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Boston, MA	601	10.43
Cambridge, MA	136	2.36
Charleston, SC	657	11.40
Charlottesville, VA	101	1.75
Cibola, NM	9	0.16
Dona Ana, NM	73	1.27
Fairfax, VA	69	1.20
Fairfield, CT	47	0.82
Fresno, CA	103	1.79
Grand Rapids	236	4.10
Harris, TX	1153	20.01
Lansing, MA	132	2.29
Los Alamos, NM	32	0.56
Milwaukee, WI	1033	17.93
Otero, NM	13	0.23
St Louis (City), MO	244	4.24
St Louis (County), MO	1093	18.97
Wellesley, MA	29	0.50
Total	5761	100.00

Table 2. Number of Ways People Learned About Poll Working.

Number of ways selected	N	%
0	959	16.7
1	3773	64.5
2	785	13.6
3	179	3.1
4	46	.8
5	14	.2
6	3	.05
7	2	.03
Total	5761	100.0

Hawaiian or Other Pacific Island,” “Other,” or “Prefer not to say.” Respondents were also asked, “Are you of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin?” To measure experience working the polls, respondents were asked “How long have you worked as a poll worker? Select one option.” Respondents were asked to pick “1 year,” “2–5 years,” “6–10 years,” “More than ten years.”

Statistical Analyses

To test all our hypotheses, we estimate a series of logistic regression models to explain the two main pathways to the polls. Although respondents could choose multiple categories, we have noted that they were remarkably consistent in reporting that they learned about poll working through either personal or impersonal pathways, rarely both. We collapse our seven individual pathways to the polls into two dummy measures, personally recruited (i.e., recruited through talking with people, or by being recruited by an outside group) and impersonal recruited (i.e., recruited by ads, news stories, emails, or websites). Descriptive statistics of the frequencies with which poll workers were recruited by each method, and the characteristics of poll workers recruited by method, are shown in the Appendix in [Tables A4–A6](#).

All statistical models include fixed effects for county jurisdictions. These fixed effects hold jurisdiction (and thus state) factors constant, making use of variation across poll workers in the same jurisdictions rather than between communities. In addition to experience working the polls and race and ethnicity, we also collected a host of socio-demographic variables including age and partisan affiliation. We use these as our control variables. Respondents were asked “With which political party do you identify?” They could respond “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent,” “Non-partisan,” “Other (please state),” or “Prefer not to answer.” Because self-identified Democrats make up more than half our respondent sample, we create a dummy variable for partisanship, where Democrat is coded as one, and zero otherwise. Respondents were asked for their year of birth to gather data on age. For ease of analysis, we create dummy variables for the following age categories: 18–25, 26–40, 41–60, 61–70, and 71+. Finally, respondents were asked, “Do you describe yourself as a man, woman, transgender, or non-binary?” We create a dummy variable for woman by coding those who selected “woman” as one, and zero otherwise. Descriptive statistics for all demographic variables are included in the [Appendix](#).

[Table 3](#) shows the logistic regression estimates for the likelihood of having learned of the opportunity to be a poll worker through impersonal and personal pathways. The coefficients for the Experience variable (indicating the number of elections/years a person has served) are positive and statistically significant for Model 1. The Experience coefficient for Model 2 is negative and statistically significant ($p < .01$). This indicates that the more experience a poll

Table 3. Demographic Factors Affecting the Path to the Polls.

Independent variables	Model 1 Personal	Model 2 Impersonal
Experience	0.196*** (0.0447)	−0.474*** (0.0631)
Black	0.419*** (0.126)	−0.480*** (0.155)
Latinx	0.0687 (0.188)	−0.00966 (0.241)
Asian	−0.260 (0.189)	0.320 (0.200)
Age (categorical)	0.127*** (0.0346)	−0.185*** (0.0396)
Democratic	0.0284 (0.0454)	0.240*** (0.0385)
Female	0.191* (0.115)	−0.327*** (0.0472)
Constant	−.429*** (0.184)	2.053*** (0.201)
Observations	4328	4328
Number of Counties	17	17

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

Fixed Effects for jurisdictions.

Model 1: Out group, people I talk with, personal recruitment.

Model 2: Ads, news, email websites.

worker has, the less likely they are to report having learned of becoming a poll worker through impersonal means such as news stories, messages from the election official, or by going to the election website. For the age category variable, all age categories are compared to the youngest 18–25 category. The age variable is positive and statistically significant ($p < .01$) for Model 1 while it is negative and statistically significant ($p < .01$) for Model 2. These coefficients suggest that all categories older than 26 are more likely to have been recruited via personal recruitment methods and were unlikely to have been recruited via impersonal methods.

The coefficient for African American is positive and statistically significant ($p < .01$) for Model 1. The coefficient was negative and statistically significant ($p < .01$) for Model 2. Gender is also significant. The coefficient for poll workers who are female is negative and statistically significant ($p < .01$). This suggests that women are less likely to be recruited by impersonal methods. Interestingly, though the coefficient for female poll workers is positive for personal methods, it is only significant at the 0.1 level. The coefficient for Latinx and Asian American identity were not statistically significant for any models. Because the numbers of Latinx individuals and Asian American respondents in our sample is small, as least compared to African Americans, these results should be taken with some caution. The lack of statistical power makes it difficult to identify true effects. Future research will hopefully be able to explore these racial and ethnic group pathways to serve more fully.

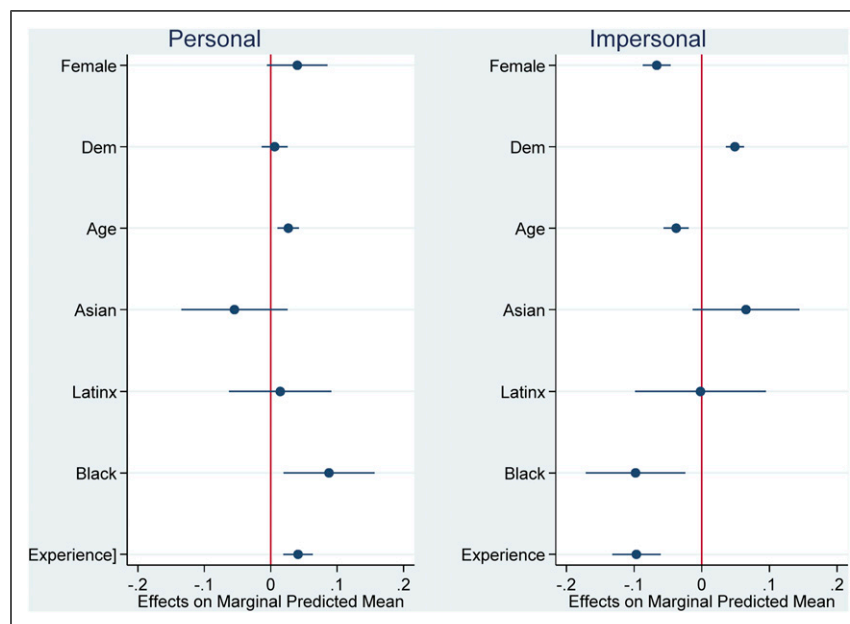


Figure 1. Marginal effects of demographics.

Figure 1 shows the marginal effects of each variable the personal and impersonal models. Experience has a relatively small effect on the probability of having been recruited through personal or impersonal methods (0.03 and -0.1 respectively). Being African American had a slightly larger effect relative to Experience on whether they were recruited by personal means (0.1). However, it had a similar effect size to that of experience on the likelihood of being recruited through impersonal methods. Age has a relatively small effect relative to experience and Black identity.

These results support Hypotheses 1 and 2. In both models, more experienced poll workers were shown to be less likely, if only to a small degree, of becoming poll workers via impersonal pathways. More experienced poll workers were more likely to report personal paths to the polls, particularly by personal recruitment. This could reflect variation in the recruitment methods used over time, particularly as impersonal media outreach became necessary during the coronavirus pandemic when face-to-face interactions were more common, or it might be something more systematic about individuals who return to serve as poll workers repeatedly versus those who serve once and do not repeat the experience. To test whether 2020 may have had a unique effect on poll worker recruitment, we estimate these models using a dummy variable for “first time” poll workers as the primary explanatory variable. The results are largely redundant of the results shown in article, suggesting that 2020, if anything, may have just exacerbated an ongoing trend. We discuss the results of first-time poll workers examination in the [Appendix Section 4](#). The paths to the polls also vary based on

race: African Americans were more likely to have found their way to the polls via personal pathways like personal recruitment and talking with people.

To ensure that our results are not driven by any on particular method, we also run these same models to explain each of the seven individual recruitment methods. We show the results of these analysis in the [Appendix Table A9](#). The individual models suggest that social media may largely be the method by which younger and/or less experienced poll workers are recruited. These models were consistent with our theoretical framing across individual models for African Americans, showing that African Americans were more likely to be recruited via each personal method. Although African American poll workers were less likely to have learned of poll worker opportunities through outside groups. Notably, African Americans were also statistically less likely to have reported seeing news stories and seeing ads on social media.

Because the motivations of poll workers could potentially have an impact on the method by which they were recruited, we test whether common motivations identified in previous work have a predictive effect on people are recruited to work the polls. [Table 4](#) shows the coefficients for how each motivation may play a role in whether a poll worker is recruited by personal or impersonal means. The coefficient for the Friends and Neighbors variable is positive and statistically significant ($p < .01$) for Model 3. It is negative and statistically significant ($p < .01$) for Model 4. This shows that those who are motivated by the opportunity to see friends and neighbors are, intuitively, more likely to be recruited by personal methods. Those who were motivated by voting rights were more likely to

Table 4. Motivational Factors Affecting the Path to the Polls.

Independent Variables	Model 3 Personal	Model 4 Impersonal
Political party	0.189 (0.139)	−0.142 (0.113)
Friends and neighbors	0.590*** (0.0819)	−0.355*** (0.0742)
Voting rights	0.110* (0.0608)	0.314*** (0.115)
Election integrity	0.109*** (0.0295)	0.0693* (0.0406)
Election process	−0.0211 (0.0873)	0.262* (0.142)
Pay	0.309*** (0.0819)	−0.00269 (0.0642)
Civic duty	0.227*** (0.0502)	0.703*** (0.0987)
Constant	−1.009*** (0.176)	−0.746*** (0.261)
Observations	5761	5761
Number of groups	18	18

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

Fixed Effects for jurisdictions.

Model 3: Out group, people I talk with, personal recruitment.

Model 4: Ads, news, email websites.

be recruited by impersonal methods ($p < .01$). The coefficient for Model 4 is positive as well, but only significant at the 0.1 level. Alternately, the coefficient for those who are motivated by concerns about election integrity is positive for both models, but it is only significant at the .1 level for impersonal methods. Though previous literature has shown that pay is a frequent motivation, this analysis shows that the coefficient for pay was only statistically significant for personal methods of recruitment ($p < .01$). Finally, the coefficient for those motivated by civic duty were positive and statistically significant for both Models 3 and 4. Those who were motivated by supporting their political party only represented an extremely small number in this sample, consequently it is unsurprising that we find no significance in this analysis for political party. These results provide additional support for Hypothesis 2 regarding motivations. The effectiveness of recruitment methods appears to be conditional on motivation.

Figure 2 shows the marginal effects of motivations on personal and impersonal recruitment methods. Most of the marginal effects were relatively small with most being smaller than .1. The motivation for wanting to work with friends and neighbors has the largest marginal effect in both models, though in opposite directions. Those who are motivated by civic duty were likely to be recruited via personal and impersonal methods, however, the size of the effect is larger for impersonal methods. This suggest that those who are motivated more intrinsically by civic duty

may be more likely to be responsive by impersonal recruitment methods than those with other motivations.

Discussion

We have offered a robust descriptive and statistical study of how people become poll workers across the United States. Our analyses show that many paths lead to the same destination. The paths, however, depend on experience and demographics. Those recruited through personal means were more likely to be older, more experienced, African American, female, and motivated by the opportunity to work with friends and neighbors. Those recruited through impersonal means were more likely to be younger, less experienced, non-African American, male, Democratic, and motivated by civic duty and voting rights. The results regarding experience could hint at the inclination of elections officials to personally recruit people who are known to have previously worked in elections, either as poll workers or perhaps in some other capacity. It could also be that election administrators used to rely more so on word of mouth to recruit poll workers. The fact that less experienced poll workers were more likely to have become poll workers by virtue of impersonal methods, suggests that more detached outreach are the primary pathways by which those who are relatively inexperienced come to election work.

The fact that African American poll workers are more likely to have been recruited via personal mechanisms than by impersonal methods could be indicative of several things. It could be that personal African American social networks are more likely to discuss opportunities for public service than people of other racial and ethnic identities. Many African American civic traditions treat election days as social events and community gatherings, such as through Souls to the Polls efforts that frequently follow Sunday church services. Outreach by elections offices via social media and stories about poll workers in the news media may simply not be reaching African Americans relative to people of other ethnicities, as African Americans social media and news viewing habits may differ from other racial and ethnic groups. Election outreach and media may not have tapped into the most appropriate online and media networks to reach into under-represented African American communities.

As poll workers are the facilitators of the democratic process, the path by which citizens make their way into such position should be of paramount interest to scholars and election administrators alike. Considering that poll workers are ever unlikely to be representative of the communities in which they serve, careful study of how poll workers are recruited or exposed to the opportunity should be carefully considered. These results should be taken by academics and administrators as an opportunity to explore the most effective methods of recruiting a diverse election work force. A more representative cadre of election workers could yield indirect benefits for voters including increased voter recidivism and bolster confidence in election results. Further research is

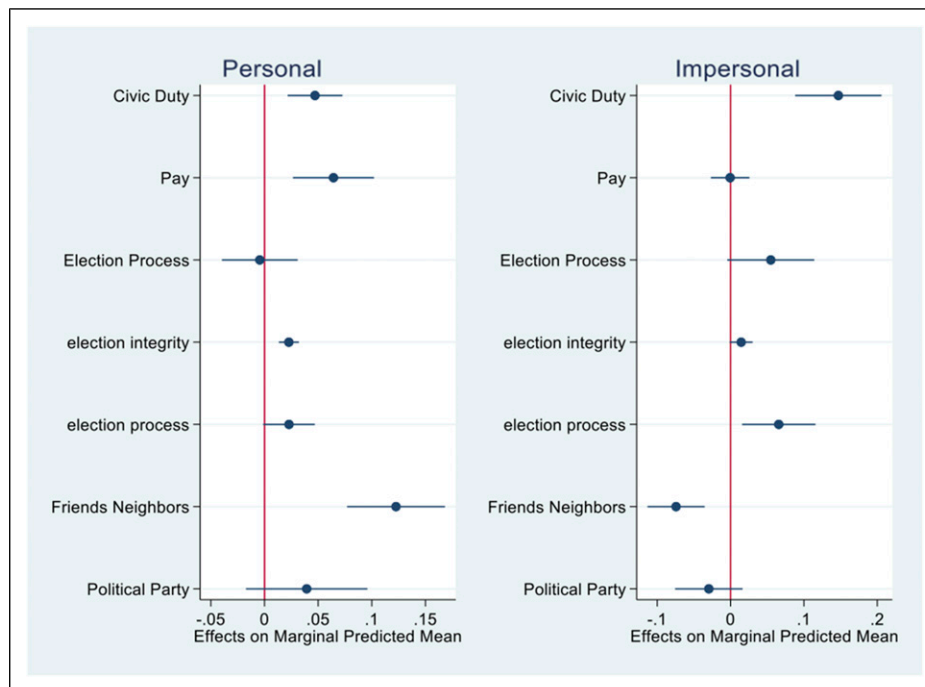


Figure 2. Marginal effects of motivation.

needed to explore the mechanisms, motivations, and attitudes of poll workers, as well as potential downstream effects of poll worker characteristics on voter experiences and democratic health. Election administrators and scholars alike should be ever mindful to expand opportunities to participate in American democracy, and increasing the number of paths into service can help build a more robust democracy.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Lubbock County, Texas administered the survey via postal mail, and was unavailable for inclusion in this article.

2. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/2022_EAVS_Report_508c.pdf, p. 21.
3. Persons who worked the polls in 2020 but were no longer interested in continuing their service may have been reluctant to participate in our survey. Those who have already stopped working at the polls may have numbered among those who did not respond to the survey. This potential selection bias may have skewed responses about working the 2022 election upward. The presence of a selection bias in our survey could also have biased our estimates of the correlates of working the polls in 2022. As noted above, in 12 of our 19 study jurisdictions state law prohibits LEOs from sharing names, addresses (including emails) and other personal information of their poll workers. In these jurisdictions, LEOs directly solicited their cadre of poll workers to take the survey at a designated URL site. For the remaining jurisdictions, LEOs shared the contact for their poll workers with the researchers to make the solicitation. If a selection bias is operative in our sample, it should be more prominent among those jurisdictions where the LEO directly solicited participation in the survey rather than responses of persons solicited directly by the researchers. Persons who decided not to work the polls in 2022 may have been reluctant to report this decision directly to their respective local election official. A solicitation to participate in the survey from the researchers, however, may have muted the reticence of persons reporting their decision not to work the polls in 2022. The expectation is that those who stopped working the polls were less likely to respond to a survey from their former employer than they would be to a solicitation from the team of researchers. Among poll workers contacted to take the survey by their LEO, 82% reported they were “very likely” to work the

2022 election. Among poll workers contacted by the researchers 78% reported they were “very likely” to work the polls in the 2022 election, for a significant difference of 4%. We re-estimated our model of working the polls in the 2022 election with a dummy measure for method of soliciting respondents (i.e., 1 = contacted by researchers, 0 = contacted by LEO). The coefficient for the method of soliciting the survey is insignificant and our estimates for other covariates for the likelihood of working the polls in 2022 election are unchanged from those reported in Table 2 (see Appendix Table A8). We assess the likelihood of a selection bias in our measure of likelihood to work the polls to be modest but non-consequential.

4. Choices included: I saw an advertisement on social media, I saw news stories about the need for poll workers, I received a message (e.g. mail or email) from elections officials I went to the website run by election official I saw information from an outside group, I was personally recruited by someone, and I learned about it from talking to people and other (please state).
5. When we dichotomize the seven pathways to the polls into personal and impersonal modes, we obtain a similarly uniform and non-overlapping designation of personal and impersonal pathways to the polls. Only 14% of our full sample of respondents ($N = 442$) identified one personal and impersonal pathway to the polls.

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