

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

## Staffing Elections

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** We identify two different dimensions of retaining poll workers: the successful retention of experienced, more seasoned poll workers and the continued participation of newer, less experienced poll workers.**Methods:** Using a unique national survey of poll workers, we test separate explanations for the successful retention of experienced and inexperienced (newer) poll workers. A web-based survey of poll workers ( $n = 4529$ ) in 19 counties within 10 states was conducted before the 2022 midterm election.**Results:** The retention of experienced poll workers is largely shaped by their positive affect and their tenure working the polls. The retention of less experienced poll workers is influenced by interactions with voters, poll watchers, and the compensation they receive for working the polls.**Conclusion:** We find the correlates of retaining experienced and less experienced poll workers are sufficiently different to support a bifurcation in the ways local election officials go about staffing elections. While far from definitive, our findings suggest a nascent strategy for staffing elections, as well as a framework for the future study regarding the recruitment and retention of poll workers.

## 1 | Introduction

The people who work elections are a lynchpin for sustaining our democratic institutions. “When voters feel good about their interactions with poll workers, they feel better about their voting experience and more confident about the electoral system” (Claassen et al. 2008, 616). Generally, in-person voters are satisfied with their election workers, as 95% of those recently surveyed rate their poll workers as “excellent” or “good” (Stewart 2022). This cadre of civically minded persons are minimally compensated for their work, are on average over the age of 60, female, retirees, affiliated with one of the major political parties, and most importantly have a long history of serving at the polls (Burden and Milyo 2015; Hall, et al. 2007; Stein et al. 2025). But in an era of relatively high turnout that is only increasing, local elections officials must grapple with whether the current pool of workers is

sustainable to meet the increased demands of voters (see Manson and Gronke 2022).

How reliable is this system of part-time workers for the conduct of our elections? Can we continue to rely on the goodwill of others to shepherd our elections? There are mixed findings on the reliability and sustainability of people to work the polls. In this article, we offer and test an explanation for these mixed findings about the staffing of elections. We identify two dimensions to staffing elections. The first dimension is the retention of experienced poll workers who have previously worked the polls. The second dimension is the continued presence of newer and less experienced people to work the polls who have been successfully recruited to work alongside veteran poll workers. The retention of experienced and inexperienced poll workers is associated with somewhat different correlates. This condition

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enables local election officials (LEOs) to staff elections with an adequate number of experienced persons while relying on a smaller number of newer and less experienced poll workers to sustain the conduct of future elections.

Using a national survey of poll workers allows us to identify newer and recurring poll workers, providing a means for identifying the best strategies for the adequate staffing of elections. In this exploratory study, we find that the correlates of retaining experienced and less experienced poll workers are sufficiently different to support a bifurcation in the ways LEOs go about staffing elections. Based on our findings, we discuss potential directions for future research and more practical strategies for poll worker recruitment by LEOs.

Our paper proceeds with an explanation for the mixed findings on the adequacy of staffing elections in the United States. We identify the attributes of people who work the polls and how their traits might distinguish newer and experienced poll workers. We test several hypotheses about the different correlates of retaining new and experienced poll workers.

## 2 | Research on Staffing Elections

Previous studies of staffing elections show a mix of findings, some of them contradictory. The Election Assistance Commission's biennial *Election Administration and Voter Survey* reports that a plurality of LEOs have difficulty finding poll workers; however, the nature and the extent of the difficulty appears to vacillate over time (Burden and Milyo 2015; Jones and Stein 2021; Roberts and Greenberger 2023; Greenberger 2024; McAuliffe 2009; Election Assistance Commission 2022). At the same time, the limited data scholars have collected from surveys of poll workers show a highly motivated cadre of people eager to continue their work in future elections (Barsky 2024; Stein et al. 2025; Högström and Jerhov 2023; Jerhov and Högström 2024; Clark and James 2023). These seemingly different pictures of the status of staffing elections may both be correct but for different populations of poll workers. Retention may be most likely for people who have worked at the polls in the past and for more elections. Enthusiastic and experienced election workers are eager to return. Retention of newer and less experienced poll workers may be more tenuous.

The ongoing difficulty of staffing elections reported by LEOs (Burden et al. [Forthcoming](#)) could reflect the challenge of retaining newer workers rather than the retention of more experienced workers with a long history of working the polls. Retention of experienced poll workers may be less problematic as suggested by several researchers (Barsky 2024; Stein et al. 2025; Högström and Jerhov 2023; Jerhov and Högström 2024; Clark and James 2023). This view of the extant literature suggests that overlapping but different factors determine whether inexperienced and experienced poll workers continue to work the polls. Several national surveys of LEOs reported that 90% of LEOs believed their poll workers "have the knowledge and skills required to do their jobs effectively" (Manson and Gronke 2022). This suggests that independent of an adequate number of poll workers, LEOs believe that those who worked the polls are adequately skilled to perform their duties. Burden and Milyo suggest this explanation

for the state of poll worker recruitment and retention as reported by LEOs:

... officials might mean to convey that it was difficult to find a sufficient number of competent poll workers rather than the raw number needed. Finally, just because it was a difficult process to find poll workers does not necessarily mean that there is a shortage in the end. (2015, 7)

Burden and Milyo's observation may speak to a bifurcation in the retention of experienced and less experienced poll workers. This difference in makeup of the workforce staffing elections may be consequential to finding an adequate number of qualified persons to work the polls.

Research on the correlates of working the polls is suggestive of a bifurcation in how elections are staffed. Clark and James (2023) and Barsky (2024) both report that worker compensation is consequential to decision to work the polls. Yet Glaser et al. (2007) and McAuliffe (2009) find that compensation for working the polls is a minor factor in the decision to work the polls. Could both findings be true but in different ways for experienced and inexperienced poll workers? Burden and Milyo (2015) offer another reason for caution in explaining compensation as motivation to work the polls: "[a]n increase in payments to poll workers will result in additional workers who are motivated more by monetary reward than civic duty." Burden and Milyo's interpretation of the diminished effect of compensation on working the polls may reflect how payment to work the polls affects the likelihood to work the polls among poll workers with different years of experience working the polls.

Another prominent explanation for working the polls is public service motivation (PSM). Barsky (2024) notes that researchers have variously hypothesized that "meaningful public service" (Houston 2000) and "doing work that is useful for society" (van Loon et al. 2013) could be linked to working the polls. Barsky (2024) reports, "[t]he findings from this study of Arizona poll workers indicate that PSM does not fully explain poll worker motivation" (p. 9). Among British poll workers, Clark and James (2023) found evidence that solidary and purposive benefits from working the polls, including the social capital benefits of working with others in their community to be related to working the polls.

Focusing on the retention of poll workers rather than the recruitment of new workers, Stein et al. (2025) find that people who believe their work at the polls is consequential for their community and who feel their work is valued, respected, and well supported are highly motivated to continue to work the polls. Difficulties at the polls with voters and poll watchers, training, and collaborations with other poll workers have no appreciable impact on poll worker retention.

The somewhat conflicted literature on why people serve as poll workers may be best understood by identifying the determinants of working the polls separately for experienced and inexperienced poll workers. Differentiating between new and experienced poll workers' reasons for working at the polls might not only clarify the ambiguity of the extant literature on who works the polls and

why but also provide concrete guidance to LEOs about distinct strategies that can be used to retain both groups as they assemble work forces for each election.

### 3 | Explaining Poll Worker Retention

Assuring there is an adequate number of qualified persons to work the polls over time requires attention to the retention of persons who have successfully worked the polls repeatedly in the past and the cadre of newer poll workers who lack that experience. Drawing on our theoretical intuition, knowledge of poll worker service, and the scholarly literature, we identify a series of factors to explore that could relate to the retention of poll workers. Research on who works the polls and why identifies demographics (i.e., age), experience (i.e., number of elections worked, interactions with voters, poll watchers, and other workers), benefits (purposive, solidarity, and monetary), and attitudes (e.g., affect and public service orientation) as explanations for working the polls (Barsky 2024; Burden and Milyo 2015; Stein et al. 2025; Högström and Jerhov 2023; Jerhov and Högström 2024; Clark and James 2023). Although based in part on studies of poll worker recruitment, we expect that all of these variables could well play a role in the retention of poll workers to varying degrees and could vary by experience.

To this list, we add another unexamined factor that might shape working at the polls: the training poll workers receive. Poll workers who believe their training prepared them well show higher levels of confidence and job satisfaction (Hall et al. 2007) and get better evaluations from voters (Claassen et al. 2008). There are also reasons to believe that experienced and inexperienced poll workers may view their training differently. Newer poll workers have little more than their training to rely upon when performing their duties at the polling place. More experienced poll workers can draw upon their previous stints as poll workers in previous elections and may have been through multiple training sessions. Consequently, the importance of training may vary conditioned on a poll worker's tenure. Here, we discuss our theoretical expectations as to the role that each of these previously studied factors plays in poll worker retention.

#### 3.1 | Age and Experience

New recruits to the polls are expected to be younger than more experienced poll workers (Election Assistance Commission 2022; Stein et al. 2025; Högström and Jerhov 2023; Jerhov and Högström 2024; Clark and James 2023). People who have worked at the polls in the past accumulate experiences, both positive and negative, about working at the polls. These cumulative experiences shape their decisions to return to the polls in future elections. New and less experienced workers are not wholly lacking in experience working the polls. However, their experiences are fewer in number and potentially more variable and idiosyncratic. When deciding whether to work a future election, less experienced workers may not have the depth of experience to offset recent negative experiences at the polls nor the confidence to draw on these limited experiences when deciding to return to the polls. Consequently, a singular negative event may have an outsized

effect on the totality of a new recruit's overall impression of the experience of being a poll worker.

Conflict at the polls with voters and poll watchers, aspects of poll worker training, and collaborations with other poll workers that result in feelings of remorse, disappointment, and discouragement are expected to deter even the most experienced poll worker from continuing their service. New workers who come to the job expecting a more idealized experience are especially prone to disappointment and a desire to end their service when encountering conflicts with voters, poll watchers or other workers. For these persons, new to the working the polls, there is not a large reservoir of positive social capital to sustain their working the polls.

- H<sub>1</sub>.** *The likelihood that a poll worker will continue to work in future elections is positively related to their age.*
- H<sub>1a</sub>.** *The effect of age on the likelihood of a poll worker will continue to work future elections will be greater for experienced than new poll workers.*
- H<sub>2</sub>.** *The likelihood that a poll worker will continue to work in future elections is positively related to the number of elections they have previously worked.*
- H<sub>2a</sub>.** *The effect of the number of elections a poll worker has participated in on their likelihood a poll worker will continue to work future elections will be greater for experienced than new poll workers.*
- H<sub>3</sub>.** *Experiences, positive and negative, working the polls are significantly related to the poll workers' decision to continue working the polls.*
- H<sub>3a</sub>.** *Experiences working the polls are more significant to the decision of new poll workers to work future elections compared to that of experienced poll workers.*

#### 3.2 | Affect

Poll worker experiences shape the belief that their work at the polls is consequential and beneficial. A. Clark and James (2023) suggest that working the polls provides workers with social capital in the form of solidarity and purposive benefits that motivate their return to the polls. The strength of this attitude is expected to be stronger and more consequential to the decision experienced workers make to work or not work the polls in future elections. For newer poll workers, their affect about working the polls is more tenuous, shaped by less social capital from shorter tenure as poll workers.

- H<sub>4</sub>.** *Affect about working the polls is positively related to the likelihood poll workers will work future elections.*
- H<sub>4a</sub>.** *Affect about working the polls has a great influence on the decision of experienced poll workers to work future elections than newer workers.*

#### 3.3 | Civic Duty

Barsky (2024) notes that researchers have variously hypothesized that "meaningful public service" (Houston 2000) and "doing work that is useful for society" (van Loon et al. 2013) could be

linked to working the polls. Moreover, PSM is well-established as a positive factor in improved retention in public sector employment, independent of rates of pay (Brewer and Selden 1998; Christensen et al. 2017; Clerkin and Cogburn 2012; Frederickson and Hart 1985; Moynihan and Pandey 2007). A sense of civic obligation, altruism and desire to serve others may vary with newer and experienced workers. Given their limited experience at the polls, civic duty might motivate newer poll workers to work the polls in future elections. For experienced workers, prior experience and an acquired affect is expected to replace a public service ethos as a motivator to work the polls.

**H<sub>5</sub>.** *New poll workers will be more likely to work in future elections out of a sense of civic duty than more experienced poll workers.*

### 3.4 | Compensation

One of the factors that is involved in the decision to become a poll worker is the compensation received for the dispensation of poll worker duties. Receiving compensation that is perceived to be adequate and fair is expected to be more consequential to the decision to work the polls for newer rather than experienced poll workers. Newer workers have a shallower set of experiences about working the polls to draw upon. Less experienced poll workers are younger than their more experienced co-workers, and compensation should be more consequential to their decision to continue working the polls. Compensation for experienced and older workers who might be retired is expected to have a smaller but still a significant effect on the decision of experienced workers to continue working the polls.

**H<sub>6</sub>.** *Receiving appropriate compensation is expected to be positively related to the decision to work the polls in future elections.*

**H<sub>6a</sub>.** *Receiving appropriate compensation is of greater importance to the decision to work the polls in future elections for newer rather than experienced poll workers.*

### 3.5 | Training

Newly recruited poll workers, unlike their more experienced colleagues, do not have the repository of experience and knowledge upon which to draw upon to contend with issues that arise at the polling place. They are more reliant upon the training provided by LEOs, and the perceived adequacy of their training will determine how comfortable they are performing their duties and the likelihood to continue working the polls. More experienced poll workers are more likely to draw upon their own prior experiences to inform them how they perform their duties. As a result, they are less reliant on training to determine their intent to continue working at the polls.

**H<sub>7</sub>.** *Positive attitudes toward training received will increase the likelihood of new poll workers to return to work in future elections but not for more experienced poll workers.*

## 4 | Methodology

No single national study has been undertaken of persons who work the polls. We collaborated with LEOs in 10 states and 19 jurisdictions to survey poll workers before the November 2022 election about their experiences and reasons for working the polls. The communities represent a wide range of contexts in terms of election laws, political cultures, and demographic profiles from sparsely populated and Republican-leaning Otero County, New Mexico, to dense, Democratic-favoring cities such as Boston, Massachusetts. Sample sizes and the number of completed surveys for the jurisdictions are reported in Appendix Table A1 in the Supporting Information.

Surveys were completed by 4529 people between September 15 and October 14, 2022, who had served as poll workers in the 2020 presidential election.<sup>1</sup> Surveys in all jurisdictions were conducted online.<sup>2</sup> Survey respondents were requested to take the survey by either their respective jurisdiction's LEO or, where allowed, by the researchers. Several follow-up requests were issued to increase response rates and representativeness of the samples. The survey queried voters about their training, problems they observed voters having at the polls, their own experience working the polls, their interactions with other poll workers and their general affect about working the polls.<sup>3</sup>

Our main interest is in the decision people make to work the polls again. For our dependent variable, respondents who had worked the 2020 election were asked how likely they were to work the polls in the upcoming November 2022 election. This is essentially the same information that election administrators receive when they reach out to prior poll workers to inquire about interest and availability in the next election. LEOs need to reliably and accurately estimate a person's intent to work the polls before each election. This is required to properly staff, equip, and operate in-person polling locations. What we seek to identify is the best means for making this prediction. Surveying people about their experiences working the polls in 2020 and their intent to work the 2022 midterm election provides a common base from which to assess the determinants of poll worker retention. Our measure of the likelihood to work the polls is a four-category ordinal measure ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely."

To differentiate new and continuing poll workers, we asked respondents how long they had worked as a poll worker: One year, 2–5 years, 6–10 years, or 10 or more years. Table 1 shows the distribution of experience. For our study, persons who reported working the polls for one or fewer years were designated as "new" recruits to the polls, and they comprised 14% of the respondents. The remainder of our sample was identified as experienced poll workers.

Following the hypotheses outlined above, summary scales were constructed from survey responses for five categories of poll worker experiences working the polls in the 2020 election: (1) training, (2) collaborating with other poll workers, (3) general affect about working the polls, (4) observed experience of voters at the polls, and (5) conflicts with others (i.e., poll workers, poll watchers, and voters).<sup>4</sup> We use multi-item batteries of questions to measure each concept in a reliable and valid fashion.

**TABLE 1** | Poll worker experience: Years worked at the polls.

|            | <b>N</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|------------|----------|----------------|
| 1 year     | 670      | 14.1           |
| 2–5 years  | 2357     | 49.6           |
| 6–10 years | 828      | 17.4           |
| 10+ years  | 889      | 18.7           |

Respondents were asked if they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with five statements about their training.

- The training instructors were knowledgeable and answered questions thoroughly.
- As a result of my training, I was adequately prepared to serve as an election worker in any election.
- I was provided with clear instructions of what was expected of me as a poll worker.
- The training provided was in-depth enough to solve any problems I experienced as a poll worker.
- Training locations were close to where I live.<sup>5</sup>

Second, people were asked about their collaborations with other poll workers. Respondents were again asked about their degree of agreement or disagreement with five statements about other poll workers with whom they worked.

- Election workers at my location were punctual.
- Election workers at my location were knowledgeable.
- Election workers at my location worked as a team and fostered a collaborative environment.
- Interactions between election workers at my location were professional, courteous, and respectful.<sup>6</sup>

Third, poll worker affect about working the polls is measured with eight agree–disagree questions. These questions did not reference any specific election but rather asked the respondent their opinions about being a poll worker over their career working the polls. Our intent is to capture the totality of circumstances influencing a person's affect about working the polls including the public service orientation that people bring to the experience.

- Working as a poll worker has become more difficult.
- Candidates and political parties unfairly blame poll workers for losing elections.
- Voters are courteous and friendly to me.
- Voters appreciate the work I do as a poll worker.
- Poll workers in my county are respected and well supported by our elected officials' duties as poll workers.
- Poll watchers for candidates and political parties perform a useful role at the polling place.
- My state has enacted laws that make it more difficult for me to perform my duties as a poll worker.

- I feel safe and secure working as a poll worker.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, to assess whether poll workers observed voters having difficulty at the polls, respondents were asked for the share of voters—most, less than half, a few, or none—that appeared to experience the following problems.

- Problems recording their vote choices on the voting equipment.
- Problems completing a provisional ballot.
- Problems checking in to vote with the proper ID.
- Poll watchers interfering with a voter trying to vote.
- Conflicts with other voters waiting to vote.
- Misunderstandings or confusion about election rules.
- Waiting more than an hour to vote.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, to assess specific exposure to difficulties by poll workers, respondents were asked whether they had one or more unpleasant experiences working the polls in the 2020 election:

- Conflict with poll watchers representing candidates or political parties.
- Difficulty with voting machines and other equipment.
- Long lines of voters waiting to vote.
- Conflict with voters.
- Conflict with other poll workers.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the other scales, the items in this intended measure of poll worker problems at the polling place do not appear to measure the same underlying concept. The five questions do not cohere, evidenced by the small alpha value and weak factor analysis results. We thus rely on the two questions about conflicts with voters and poll watchers, both of which were frequently mentioned in news accounts during and after the 2020 election. We believe that the excluded questions about difficulty with voting machines, long lines, and conflicts with other poll workers are captured in our measures of voter problems at the polls and poll worker collaborations, although additional research should explore the facets of what poll workers perceive to be “problems” at the polling place.<sup>10</sup>

Respondents were asked whether they agree strongly, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “I am paid fairly for my work as a poll worker.” Agreement with this statement is expected to be positively related to the likelihood to work the polls in 2022. Like A. Clark and James (2023), we measure PSM to work the polls with a question that asked respondents, “What motivated you to work as a poll worker?” Four choices were presented including “civic duty.”<sup>11</sup> Forty-five percent of the sample identified civic duty as a motivation for working the polls.

In addition to the above measures, our model of intent to work the polls in 2022 includes the respondent's age<sup>12</sup> and the number of elections the respondents worked the polls since 2020.<sup>13</sup> Descriptive statistics for each dependent and independent

**TABLE 2** | Likelihood of working the polls in 2022 (percent by row).

|                  | Very likely | Somewhat likely | Somewhat likely | Very likely |
|------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Boston           | 94.4        | 2.2             | 1.1             | 2.2         |
| Cambridge        | 73.6        | 9.1             | 10.9            | 6.4         |
| Charleston       | 70.2        | 14.4            | 5.1             | 10.4        |
| Charlottesville  | 77.0        | 8.1             | 6.9             | 8.1         |
| Cibola           | 80.0        | 0.0             | 0.0             | 20.0        |
| Doña Ana         | 97.0        | 0.0             | 0.0             | 3.0         |
| Fairfax          | 90.5        | 7.1             | 0.0             | 2.4         |
| Fairfield        | 65.8        | 23.7            | 10.5            | 0.0         |
| Fresno           | 94.7        | 2.7             | 1.3             | 1.3         |
| Grand Rapids     | 77.8        | 9.2             | 3.9             | 9.2         |
| Harris           | 89.5        | 10.6            | 0.0             | 0.0         |
| Lansing          | 76.1        | 8.9             | 3.5             | 11.5        |
| Los Alamos       | 83.3        | 5.6             | 0.0             | 11.1        |
| Milwaukee        | 81.7        | 6.2             | 4.5             | 7.6         |
| Otero            | 90.0        | 0.0             | 0.0             | 10.0        |
| St. Louis City   | 67.0        | 14.8            | 5.9             | 12.3        |
| St. Louis County | 75.9        | 3.8             | 4.8             | 15.5        |
| Wellesley        | 92.3        | 7.7             | 0.0             | 0.0         |
| Total            | 78.8        | 7.2             | 4.5             | 9.8         |

**TABLE 3** | Likelihood to work the polls in 2022 by experience (percent by column).

|                   | 1 year | 2–5 years | 6–10 years | 10+ years |
|-------------------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Very likely       | 52.1   | 82.9      | 89.2       | 90.3      |
| Somewhat likely   | 20.3   | 7.7       | 4.3        | 3.3       |
| Somewhat unlikely | 11.2   | 2.7       | 1.5        | 1.4       |
| Very unlikely     | 16.3   | 6.6       | 5.2        | 4.8       |

measure are reported in Appendix Table A2 in the Supporting Information. The inter-correlations among our survey measures are modest and do not raise concerns about multicollinearity (see Appendix Table A3 in the Supporting Information).

## 5 | Findings

Table 2 shows that nearly four out of five respondents (79%) reported that they were very likely to work the polls in the 2022 election. Although a high proportion of poll workers express a strong interest in continuing to work the polls, there is some notable variation in this predisposition among our sample of jurisdictions. The range in the percent of respondents who reported they were “*very likely*” to work the polls in 2022 run from a low of 67% in the city of St. Louis to 97% in Doña Ana County, New Mexico.

The picture of widespread interest in working the polls in 2022 changes when we compare likelihood to work the polls for newer

and experienced poll workers, as shown in Table 3. It is worth noting that a high proportion of both newer and experienced poll workers expressed a strong likelihood to work the 2022 election, in spite the circumstances of the 2020 election and its aftermath. At the same time, only 52% of people who worked the polls for one or fewer years reported they were very likely to work the 2022 election. That return rate increases with experience. Among persons who reported they had worked the polls for two or more years, 82% reported they would be very likely to work the polls in 2022. Moreover, when broken down by individual jurisdiction, we observe a significant variation both within and between jurisdictions among experienced and new poll workers’ likelihood to work the 2022 election.

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. While this kind of selection bias is possible, the EAVS survey of LEOs found that approximately 17% of poll workers were new in 2022.<sup>14</sup> This rate is quite like the

**TABLE 4** | Mixed effects logit estimates for *very likely* to work the polls in 2022.

| Variables                   | New workers         | Experienced workers  | Difference in coefficients | Standard error of difference |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Adequately paid             | 0.283**<br>(0.145)  | 0.139**<br>(0.067)   | 0.144                      | 0.129                        |
| Elections worked            | 0.204<br>(0.134)    | 0.925***<br>(0.058)  | −0.721***                  | 0.121                        |
| Age (categorical)           | 0.270**<br>(0.113)  | 0.167***<br>(0.054)  | 0.103                      | 0.099                        |
| Affect                      | −0.0519<br>(0.287)  | 0.740***<br>(0.134)  | −0.792***                  | 0.254                        |
| Training                    | −0.083<br>(0.185)   | −0.079<br>(0.095)    | −0.004                     | 0.159                        |
| Other workers               | 0.0200<br>(0.168)   | 0.150*<br>(0.087)    | −0.130                     | 0.144                        |
| Voter problems              | −0.145<br>(0.227)   | −0.228**<br>(0.114)  | 0.084                      | 0.195                        |
| Conflict with voters        | 0.218<br>(0.341)    | −0.157<br>(0.165)    | 0.376                      | 0.299                        |
| Conflict with poll watchers | −1.218**<br>(0.541) | −0.106<br>(0.215)    | −1.111***                  | 0.496                        |
| Civic duty                  | −0.477<br>(0.286)   | −0.074<br>(0.119)    | −0.406                     | 0.260                        |
| Constant                    | −1.661<br>(1.121)   | −4.114***<br>(0.569) | 2.447*                     | 0.966                        |
| Observations                | 480                 | 3248                 |                            |                              |
| Number of groups            | 14                  | 18                   |                            |                              |

Note: The first two columns report mixed effects logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.10$ .

approximately 19% of poll workers we surveyed who did not say they were “*very likely*” to serve that year.

Table 4 reports the mixed effects logit estimates of being “*very likely*” to work the polls in the 2022 election by new and experienced poll workers. This multilevel model allows for respondents in the same communities to be more similar by estimating random effects for jurisdictions.<sup>15</sup> Marginal effects from the models are displayed in Figure 1. Tables A4 and A5 and Figures A1 and A2 in the Appendix in the Supporting Information report the logit coefficients and predicted probabilities separately for each of the four possible answer choices in our dependent measure (ranging from “*very likely*” to “*very unlikely*”) estimated separately for newer and experienced poll workers. Models are weighted for the frequency of responses for each jurisdiction with fixed effects for jurisdictions and random intercepts. The latter captures differences that might arise among jurisdictions such as demographic differences that are not explicitly measured in our model.

Our focus is on the determinants of poll worker retention. The coefficients in Table 4 are compared to zero to determine their statistical significance. We are most interested in the relative size of the marginal effects within each group of poll workers. In addition, we have included two columns in Table 4 that identify coefficients that vary significantly between new and experienced poll workers. Column three reports the absolute difference between coefficients for new and experienced workers for each independent variable. A Hausman test (Hausman 1978) is reported in column four and informs us about the significance in the difference in estimates for each covariate of retention between new and experienced poll workers.

As expected, the correlates of poll worker retention diverge between new and experienced poll workers. Only age and compensation were significant correlates of retention for both new and experienced poll workers. There is a 5.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood that new poll workers will express an interest in working the 2022 election if they perceive the compen-

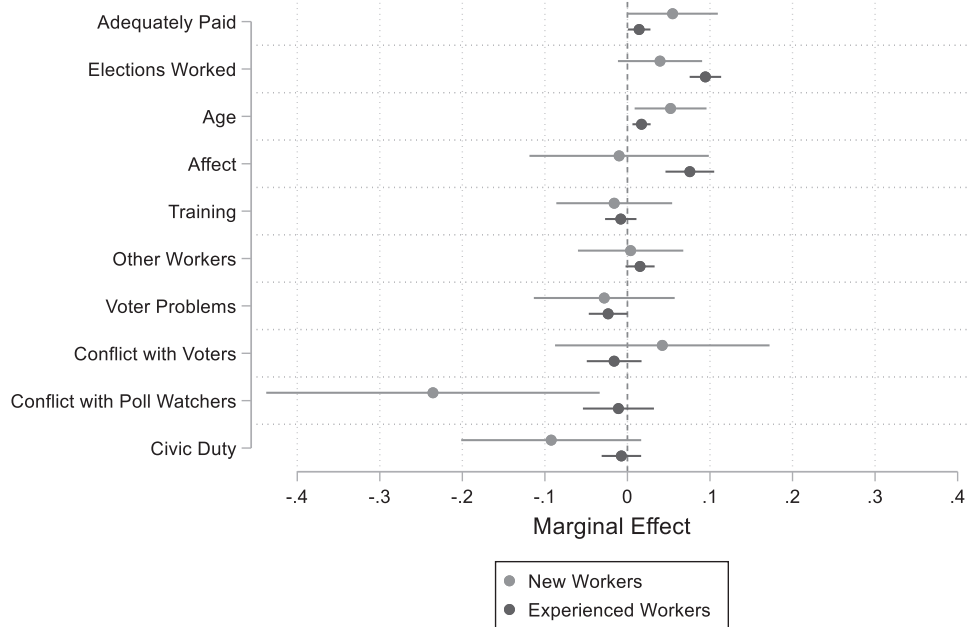


**FIGURE 1** | Predicted probabilities of reporting *very likely* to work the polls again.

sation they receive for at the polls as adequate. For experienced poll workers, the effect of compensation on the likelihood to work the polls is significant but trivial. There is only a 1.4 percentage point increase in the likelihood of working the polls if the experienced poll workers perceive their compensation as adequate.

Unlike experienced poll workers, new poll workers are significantly less likely to work the 2022 election if they experienced conflicts with poll watchers in 2020. There is a 23 percentage point decrease in the likelihood that a new poll worker will work the 2022 election if they reported conflicts with poll watchers. The likelihood that experienced poll workers reported they would not work the 2022 election is unrelated to whether they experienced conflict with poll watchers during the 2020 election. Presumably, experienced workers acquire skills from working the polls that enable them to cope with disruptive poll watchers.

Experienced poll workers are significantly more likely to express an intent to work the 2022 election the more elections they have worked in since 2020. There is a 9.4 percentage point increase in their likelihood of working the 2022 election across the range of elections worked since 2020 (i.e., none, one, two, or more than two). The same relationship is not significant for new poll workers. Even in the aftermath of the challenging 2020 elections, experienced poll workers were not deterred from expressing an interest in working the polls. Problems poll workers observed voters having at the polls (e.g., checking in, operating voting equipment, etc.) had a significant and negative effect on their likelihood to report they would be very likely to work the 2020 election, but this effect is modest in size. Across the range of problems that experienced poll workers observed among voters, there is only a 2.3 percentage point decline in the likelihood that an experienced poll worker reported they would be very likely to work the polls in 2022.

There may be an element of endogeneity in our finding that experienced workers are more likely to work in future elections: people who have served repeatedly are likely to keep doing so. For the most part, the involvement of experienced workers toiling at the polls is cumulatively positive. Experienced poll workers are people who have, for the most part, learned how to navigate the challenges of working the polls to their satisfaction. Further evidence of how experienced workers gain from their experience at the polls is how affect about working the polls shapes the decision of poll workers to work future elections. Positive affect about working the polls significantly increases the likelihood of working in the 2022 election for experienced but not new workers. For experienced workers, there is a 7.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood they will report being very likely to work the 2022 election.

It is noteworthy that training, civic duty, and conflict with voters were unrelated to either new or experienced poll workers' intention to work the polls in 2022. Surveys of poll workers identify civic duty as a frequently cited reason for working the polls. Our findings underscore the potential slippage between workers' stated reasons for working the polls and their intent to work the polls. One might naturally expect that the most direct and efficacious means of retaining poll workers is the training they receive from LEOs. The absence of a relationship between poll workers' assessment of their training and their likelihood to work future elections, especially for new workers, is both surprising and potentially disappointing. Below, we discuss this and other findings to identify ways LEOs might address staffing of elections. Our findings suggest some significant differences in the correlates of new and experienced poll workers returning to work the polls in 2022. But do these coefficients differ significantly between new and experienced poll workers? The Hausman tests reported in the fourth column of Table 4 show that the coefficients

for three independent variables—years working at the polls, affect about work at the polls, and conflict with poll watchers—are significantly different between new and experienced poll workers. These differences are consistent with our findings above and further demonstrate how the same correlates vary in shaping the intentions of new and experienced poll workers to work the 2022 elections.

Our findings are in line with earlier research (Glaser et al. 2007; McAuliffe 2009) about the efficacy of compensation as a means of recruiting and retaining poll workers. The muted effect the perceived fairness of payment to work the polls has on continuing to work the polls may reflect the variable amounts different jurisdictions pay their poll workers (Jones and Stein 2021).

Cumulative experience working the polls and the strong effect these experiences produce for experienced poll workers positively determines their likelihood to work the 2022 election. These experiences and their residual effect on affect toward working the polls are absent among new recruits to the polls. New recruits to the polls have little experience in which to draw when deciding to continue working the polls. Their most likely and common experience on which they can rely on for continuing to work the polls is the compensation they receive for their work. The adequacy of compensation for working the polls provides only modest and marginally significant effects on new workers' intention to continue working the polls. Not having been "seasoned" by prior experience, new poll workers are more sharply affected by pleasant and unpleasant events at the polls. They are deterred by conflicts with poll watchers. These interactions may conflict with the expectations these new workers had about how their service would unfold. In contrast, experienced poll workers are not deterred by either of these kinds of conflicts, although seeing voters have difficulty is a mild deterrent for veteran poll workers. Compensation might have been a factor that initially attracted them to serving years ago, but they have since decided to continue working based on a wider variety of considerations. A "thick skin" and more realistic expectations may cause experienced poll workers to be more resilient volunteers even when having a less-than-ideal experience in a particular election.

## 6 | Discussion

Research to date on why people work the polls is unsettled. Answers to who and why people work the polls need greater clarity before we can recommend concrete steps LEOs can take to assure they have an adequate number of qualified persons to work the polls over time. The challenge of staffing and conducting elections requires addressing the retention of less-experienced and experienced poll workers. We show that these tasks require attention to different factors that correlate with the likelihood of new and experienced polls to continue working the polls. Lacking a deep experience at the polls, new poll workers are largely enticed back to the polls via the compensation they receive for working the polls. Their service can be disrupted at an early stage by unpleasant interactions with voters and poll observers. Based on their positive affect and seasoning, experienced workers are largely self-retained by their experiences at the polls and possibly the encouragement of co-workers.

There are multiple practical implications for LEOs seeking to retain poll workers. Several factors affecting retention are similar for both new and veteran poll workers, such as the belief that one is adequately paid for their work. Yet other factors that are presumably quite important to local officials such as the quality of training also work similarly for both groups in that they do not have much relationship to retention. Our study highlights a third set of factors that appear to work differently for the two kinds of poll workers. An example is conflict with poll watchers, which does not appear to deter veteran poll workers but does inhibit the retention of new poll workers. LEOs might try to initially shield new poll workers from these kinds of negative interactions until they have built up more experience on the job. There might also be lessons from our study for managers who seek to retain employees and volunteers in other non-profit and public sector domains.

In some respects, our findings are not unexpected but might need a qualification. Our sample of new poll workers is modest ( $N = 480$  in 14 jurisdictions). As a result, generalizability is limited and standard errors for the coefficients in our model of working the 2022 election for new recruits might be too large to detect statistical significance. Unexpectedly, training and collaboration with other poll workers were unrelated to either new or experienced workers' willingness to work the 2020 election. These two factors are well within the command of LEOs to employ when retaining poll workers, especially those with limited experience. Future research might look more carefully at how new and experienced poll workers are trained and assigned to work together as a means of retaining new workers for future elections.

Though more work is needed to make more specific recommendations, our findings point to a possibly nascent strategy for staffing elections like many other public and private labor markets. The demands of any labor force require keeping a steady albeit modest flow of persons entering the work environment. Over time, the retention of new recruits makes them available to replace those experienced workers who retire and/or leave the workforce. Research on labor markets for police officers (Wilson 2012; E. Williams and Sondhi 2022), fire fighters (McLennan et al. 2009), and teachers (Preston 2019) as well as private sector production workers (Taplin and Winterton 2007; DeVaro and Morita 2013) all document the need to have a steady influx of new workers to be trained and ready to replace experienced workers.

In addition to the practical recommendations to LEOs, our findings also set the framework for a future research agenda on poll workers. At any point in time, the number of workers entering and leaving the poll worker labor force is modest. A sustained disruption in the entry of new workers can be problematic. As the literature suggests that local officials struggle with replacing exiting experienced poll workers, future research should identify the ratio of new to exiting poll workers against the total labor force needs for conducting elections. Beginning in 2022, EAVS asked local administrators about the number of first-time poll workers. Going forward, researchers will be able to calculate the proportion of first-time poll workers. This number can be compared with the reported distribution of total poll workers by age, using cutoffs of 71 years of age and above as the population of experienced workers approaches the end of their tenure working the polls. With these new measures in hand, researchers and LEOs can better anticipate their own staffing needs and measure

them against indices of local election performance (see Ritter and Tolbert 2024).

## Acknowledgments

The data used for this study were funded by a grant from the MIT Election Data & Science Lab. The authors would like to thank Gayle Alberda, Lonna Atkeson, Lisa Bryant, Rachel Cobb, Michael Gilbert, Joshua Hostetter, David Kimball, Kenneth R. Mayer, Costas Panagopoulos, Andrew Reeves, Corwin Smidt, and Jennifer Victor for their help in the data collection efforts.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Completed and partially completed surveys were conducted with 5761 people. 569 people did not complete the survey, and another 663 persons did not work the 2020 election, reducing our sample of persons who completed the survey and worked the 2020 election to 4529. Missing data for some survey questions further reduce our effective sample for modeling likelihood to work the 2022 election to 4209 persons.
- <sup>2</sup>Sample selection and solicitation to participate in the survey of poll workers are discussed in the Appendix in the Supporting Information under the heading “Sample Selection and Solicitation to Participate in the Survey.”
- <sup>3</sup>The content of survey varied in several jurisdictions to accommodate the needs of LEOs. This paper reports the results of the common survey questions asked of respondents in all 19 jurisdictions.
- <sup>4</sup>A score is created for every observation for which there is a response to at least one item. The summative score is divided by the number of items over which the sum is calculated.
- <sup>5</sup>The results of a factor analysis of the five questions about poll worker training produced an eigenvalue for the first extracted factor of 3.1 and a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88.
- <sup>6</sup>The results of a factor analysis of the five questions about other poll workers produced an eigenvalue for the first extracted factor of 2.9 and a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.79.
- <sup>7</sup>The results of a factor analysis of the 10 questions about affect produced an eigenvalue for the first extracted factor of 2.1 and a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.61.
- <sup>8</sup>The results of a factor analysis of the seven questions about affect produced an eigenvalue for the first extracted factor of 3.0 and a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.84.
- <sup>9</sup>The results of a factor analysis of the five questions about poll worker problems at the polls produced an eigenvalue for the first extracted factor of 0.1 and a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.1.
- <sup>10</sup>The inter-correlation (Kendall Tau) between reported problems with poll watchers and problems with voters is 0.16 (ASE = 0.024). The factor loadings for these two items were the largest loadings on the first extracted factor, that is, 0.23.
- <sup>11</sup>Other choices included the money I am paid as a poll worker, interest in the election process, commitment to election integrity and commitment to voting rights. Respondents could check multiple responses.
- <sup>12</sup>The categories are 18–25, 26–40, 41–60, 61–70, and 70+.
- <sup>13</sup>The categories are no elections, one election, two elections, more than two elections.

<sup>14</sup>[https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/2022\\_EAVS\\_Report\\_508c.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/2022_EAVS_Report_508c.pdf), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup>The models were implemented using the `melogit` command in Stata and produce results similar to a logit models with fixed effects for jurisdictions.

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Marginal Effects for Likelihood to Work the Polls in 2022: Experienced Workers

## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

**Table A1:** Poll Worker Sample and Completed Surveys by Jurisdiction.

**Table A2:** Descriptive Statistics (Unweighted). **Table A3:** Correlations

among Survey Measures (unweighted). **Table A4:** Mixed Effects Logit

Estimates for Likelihood to Work the Polls in 2022: New Workers. **Table**

**A5:** Mixed Effects Logit Estimates for Likelihood to Work the Polls in 2022:

Experienced Workers. **Table A7:** Factor Analysis. **Figure A1:** Marginal

Effects for Likelihood to Work the Polls in 2022: New Workers. **Figure A2:**