

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

¡Vote Aqui! The Experiences and Motivations of Poll Worker Translators

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ABSTRACT

Objective: First, we examine whether poll worker translators (PWTs) perceive state policies and election officials as hostile to their role during elections. Second, we consider the motivations why PWTs serve as poll workers. We consider three potential explanations for their service: civic duty and service to their community, solidarity and congregating with others, and material benefits such as financial compensation.

Methods: We analyze the data from a web-based survey of poll workers ($n = 5771$) in 19 counties within 10 states before the 2022 midterm election. The survey asked questions about poll worker responsibilities, including whether they provided translation services during the election ($n = 134$ PWTs). The survey also asked several questions about poll worker affect, motivations, and demographics.

Results: PWTs are more likely to report that state laws make their job more difficult than poll workers who do not translate during an election. We also find that PWTs are more committed to voting rights than non-PWTs.

Conclusion: PWTs have more intrinsic motivations and self-report more concerns related to state laws increasing the difficulty of being a poll worker. These insights may help inform the recruitment efforts of election administrators who need translation services in their culturally and linguistically diverse jurisdictions.

1 | Introduction

The United States is one of the world's most ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse countries. According to the 2018–2022 American Community Survey estimates, while most Americans speak English fluently, ~20% of Americans report being able to speak English less than “very well.” While this may be a testament to the cultural diversity of the United States, it also introduces a unique barrier to non-English-speaking American citizens who may not be able to read an English language ballot when they attempt to vote. Language barriers in the voting process are a significant issue that could disrupt or even deny the ability to

vote for non-English-speaking voters. Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act attempts to remedy this barrier by mandating that translators and translated voting materials be made available in any jurisdiction where more than 5% of the voting-age citizenry are members of a single-language minority group and do not “speak or understand English adequately enough to participate in the electoral process.”¹

It is incumbent upon state and local authorities to comply with federal requirements by eliminating those language barriers for non-English-speaking voters. While elections offices can print translated ballots and voter information, the administration of

in-person elections requires personnel who speak languages other than English to assist non-English-speaking voters. Poll worker translators (PWTs) are crucial to that effort, ensuring non-English speakers are not obstructed from exercising their right to vote. Acting as “street-level bureaucrats,” poll workers have wide latitude in implementing state election laws and procedures and thus can positively or negatively impact voters’ affective disposition toward the voting process (Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Chen et al. 2021; King and Barnes 2019; see Barsky 2024; Atkeson et al. 2014; Burden et al. 2012; Kimball and Kropf 2006; Suttman-Lea 2020).² For non-English-speaking voters, PWTs not only affect the experience and disposition toward voting but play an outsized role in assuring the right to vote itself. PWTs are also unique from their non-PWT counterparts because they provide passive and *active* roles at polling sites. For example, PWTs passively represent non-English-speaking voters during the voting process by their presence within the street-level bureaucracy ranks, allowing them to see themselves within the political process (Mosher 1968). PWTs do this while actively assisting non-English speakers in casting their ballot, providing a connection between representation and voter outcomes (Bradbury and Kellough 2011). Consequently, understanding the attitudes and motivations of PWTs is important because, unlike other poll workers, they not only affect non-English-speaking voters’ comfort with and confidence in the election process but are indispensable in guaranteeing voting rights for non-English-speaking voters.

In this article, we ask two important theoretical and practical questions: do poll worker translators have different (1) motivations for working elections and (2) perceptions of their role as election administrators compared to their non-translating colleagues? Even though poll workers play a vital role in implementing in-person elections, scholars know little about poll worker motivations and perceptions (Burden and Milyo 2015). In the present article, we argue local election officials may be better equipped to recruit bilingual or multilingual poll workers if scholars better understand the motivations and perceptions of PWTs. This recruitment may ease some of the burdens of administering elections in increasingly diverse communities, especially as the United States’ ethnically and linguistically diverse populations continue to grow.

To examine these questions, we ran a pre-election survey of poll workers in 19 jurisdictions in 10 states after the 2022 midterm elections to find out the experiences and attitudes of PWTs. We asked poll workers about their demographics, characteristics, election responsibilities, concerns, and experiences. We find some evidence that PWTs are more motivated by public service benefits such as a commitment to voting rights than their non-PWT colleagues. Additionally, PWTs are more likely to feel that state laws make it difficult to be a poll worker than their fellow non-PWTs. Interestingly, PWTs self-report being less motivated by civic duty than their non-PWT colleagues. We find no difference in solidary (i.e., interacting with neighbors) and material (i.e., money) benefit motivations between PWTs and non-PWTs.

2 | The Important Role of Poll Workers

Charged with the street-level administration of in-person elections, poll workers facilitate the voting process by checking

in voters, providing assistance in operating voting equipment, and implementing the logistics of polling place operations (Burden and Milyo 2015; Kimball and Kropf 2006). In carrying out these duties, poll workers have considerable discretion and exercise subjective judgments when enforcing voting laws such as signature matching and checking voter identification (Atkeson et al. 2014; Suttman-Lea 2020; Atkeson and Saunders 2007). For example, Atkeson et al. (2014) found that the frequency with which poll workers checked voter identification was conditioned upon the poll worker’s individual belief in the importance of such laws. Suttman-Lea (2020) found that voter signature matching was frequently at the mercy of the qualitative judgments of poll workers.

While carrying out these duties, poll workers can affect the overall experiences of voters at the polling place and the confidence in the integrity of the election (See: Chen et al. 2021; Stein et al. 2019; King and Barnes 2019). Chen et al. (2021) found that higher levels of perceived helpfulness of poll workers positively affected voter experiences. On the other hand, long lines and wait times during the check-in process negatively affect voter experiences. Not only do these long lines disproportionately affect minority populations, but they negatively affect future voter turnout (Lamb 2021; Stein et al. 2019; Pettigrew 2021).

For non-English-speaking voters, the assistance of poll workers is considerably important. Not only do these voters have to incur the traditional challenges associated with navigating the registration and voting process in the United States, but they must also undergo the additional burden of requesting translated ballots, translated voting instructional materials, and requesting poll worker assistance in a language other than English. For example, if these voters need help using the voting machines, they will also require poll workers who can assist them in their native language.

We argue that PWTs alleviate some of these burdens by providing non-English-speaking voters with a more welcoming voting environment through translation assistance. However, in doing so, PWTs take on additional responsibilities and administrative burdens that other poll workers do not. In addition to the same duties that all poll workers must perform, PWTs are essential to ensuring the voting rights of a language minority group to whom only they can assist.

These additional responsibilities may result in greater mental and emotional burdens for PWTs as they shoulder the extra weight of ensuring that the voting rights of non-English-speaking voters are not hindered or obstructed (see Clark et al. 2022). On the other hand, the added translation tasks and low pay suggest that PWTs may have higher levels of commitment to civic duty and voting rights than non-PWT poll workers. This civic-mindedness may lead to more solidary motivations for serving as a poll worker, such as the social capital benefits of serving one’s community, relative to non-PWTs. Accordingly, the additional responsibilities of PWTs warrant a particularized study of their perceptions and motivations among all poll workers.

3 | Poll Worker Motivations

The scholarly evidence of poll worker motivations has primarily focused on the competing notions of whether poll workers merely seek material benefits, such as hourly pay, or have more

normative and altruistic motivations (Glaser and Mac Donald 2007; McAuliffe 2009; Barsky 2024; Clark and James 2021; Perry and Wise 1990; Knoke and Wright-Isak 1982; Perry 1996). Scholars offer mixed evidence for the strongest motivator to poll workers. Though Glaser and Mac Donald (2007) and McAuliffe (2009) find financial compensation to be only a minor motivating factor in the decision to become a poll worker, more recent scholarship finds financial compensation to be a key incentive for poll workers (Barsky 2024; Clark and James 2021). Barsky (2024) finds financial compensation is the primary motivation but finds little evidence of a public service motivation.

Other scholars argue that poll workers are driven by intrinsic and normative motivations, such as commitment to civic duty, patriotism, and dedication to public service (Clark and James 2023; McAuliffe 2009; Barsky 2020; Perry and Wise 1990; Knoke and Wright-Isak 1982; Perry 1996). Clarke and James (2023) find varied poll worker motivations, finding that, in addition to money, poll workers are incentivized by “solidary” benefits like the social capital of working with community members. However, age and other socioeconomic indicators condition “solidary, purposive, and material” motivations (Clark and James 2023, 199).

Clark and James’ (2023) mixed findings could suggest that poll worker motivations are likely conditional upon individual-level factors such as their duties and characteristics. When staffing elections, it is only on rare occurrences that poll workers have an official role as a “translator.” Being a PWT is often incidental to their normal duties as a poll worker, and they are usually not paid extra for providing translation services. Consequently, they voluntarily take on an additional burden that other poll workers do not. We argue that poll workers willing to take on these responsibilities may have more solidary motivations for working the elections than their fellow non-translating coworkers.

4 | Poll Worker Translator Perceptions and Motivations

Election officials self-report that finding enough poll workers to run an election is difficult (Burden and Milyo 2015; Hostetter 2020; Hostetter and Lebron 2024). Attempting to recruit PWTs may exacerbate the difficulty further. In other words, election officials must also recruit bilingual voters to serve non-English-speaking populations. This difficulty might be especially salient in the aftermath of the 2020 election that has resulted in election denialism; hostility toward election workers from politicians; the mistrust of, and threats against, elections workers; and the perceived hostility toward Latino and non-English-speaking voters (Corasaniti 2021; Gutierrez et al. 2019; Reilly 2016; Sly and Guray 2021; Thomas and Werner 2017). PWTs may be especially sensitive to perceptions of hostility toward election workers in this environment.

Some states have also passed new restrictions, regulations, and reforms governing the election process (Morris 2023). When we also consider the perceived hostile rhetoric toward non-English-speaking voters and newly passed laws that facilitate challenges to voter eligibility (Ura 2021; Niesse 2024), PWTs may face an increased risk of being challenged. This could heighten concerns among PWTs about the political discourse surrounding elections

and some of the new laws governing election practices relative to non-PWTs.

Further, electoral institutions have systematically and negatively affected racial minority communities (Brady et al. 2001; Clarke 2007; Hostetter 2016; Posner 2001), and racial minorities are aware of these systematic inequalities (Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin et al. 1969; Gurin et al. 1980). While all non-English speakers may not be racial minorities, they are inherently a minority group. Recent scholarly work finds evidence that counties previously covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act reduced election resources, such as the number of poll workers, early voting sites, and election day voting sites, where the Latino population was growing (Coll et al. 2024). We argue that the systematic impact of some electoral institutions on minority communities and the awareness of these discriminations by the minority group may make poll worker translators more skeptical of elected officials and the laws governing the electoral process. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H1. *PWTs will be more likely to believe that state laws have made it more difficult to be a poll worker compared to non-PWTs.*

H2. *PWTs will be more likely to believe elected officials are hostile to poll workers compared to non-PWTs.*

Poll worker diversity and representation matter. King and Barnes (2019) find that descriptive representation among poll workers positively affects faith and security in the election process for African American and Latinx voters. Evidence also suggests that translators and translated election materials, as mandated by Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, increased Latino representation among local-level elected officials (Marschall and Rutherford 2016).

The passive and active presence of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities leads to more positive and equitable outcomes in local education and law enforcement (Grissom et al. 2009; Park and Favero 2023; Riccucci et al. 2018), and election administration scholars find similar outcomes for poll workers (King and Barnes 2019). Therefore, poll worker translators for non-English-speaking voters may lead to more positive voting experiences for these minority groups by bridging the linguistic gap, especially in communities not covered by Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act.

For those voters who do not speak English as their first or primary language, PWTs are crucial to the voting process by ensuring that the ability to vote is not denied because of a language barrier. At the same time, language barriers introduce additional hurdles for poll workers who work as translators since election administrators rely on poll workers to function as translators *in addition to* their election administration responsibilities. Only under rare conditions, such as when required by state law, are poll workers given special or specific designations as translators.³

Rather, these bilingual or multilingual individuals are hired as poll workers like everyone else. If poll workers happen to speak a language for which translation is needed, then they provide that service. Poll workers who speak more than one language are usually not paid extra for their translation service even though they perform additional responsibilities compared to their

monolingual colleagues. Because of issues that also come with working with non-English-speaking voters, such as challenges to eligibility and the difficulty of providing a positive experience to voters who are taking on additional burdens, PWTs potentially endure increased emotional labor (Clark et al. 2023). Yet, PWTs continue in their positions, without more compensation. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H3. *PWTs will be more likely to have solidary and/or public service motivations rather than be motivated by material benefits compared to non-PWTs.*

5 | Data and Methods

We administered a national web survey in 19 jurisdictions across 10 states by collaborating with local elections officials and leading election scholars (Stein et al., 2024). A pre-election survey was administered primarily by email from September 22 to October 22, 2022. In the present article, we use data from 17 jurisdictions and include responses from 4608 respondents.⁴ Of the total survey respondents, 134 reported being translators. While this is a relatively small *N*, it is important to note that this still constitutes one of the largest and most diverse individual-level national samples of poll workers to date. To our knowledge, no other poll worker dataset has recorded poll worker responsibilities and services.

Consequently, a sample of 134 translators does give us some leverage to make some suggestive assertions regarding the affect and motivations of PWTs. The states are a mixture of reliably Democratic, Republican, and competitive states that vary by geographic region. Further, the counties in the dataset represent heavily urban and rural areas, with varying political orientations. With so many jurisdictions included, this dataset constitutes one of the most geographically diverse datasets on poll workers collected by scholars (see Barsky 2024; Clark and James 2023; Suttman-Lea 2020).

The distribution of poll workers between jurisdictions is listed in Supporting Information Appendix Table A1. Descriptive statistics of the demographic composition of our sample are listed in Supporting Information Appendix Tables A2–A5. In the tables, we compare the demographic composition of PWTs to non-PWTs. Though it is difficult to know how well our convenience sample approximates a national sample of US poll workers, we contend that this dataset constitutes one of the more representative samples compared to previous quantitative studies of poll workers. Previous studies have relied on smaller observations in more limited, sometimes even singular, geographic locations (Barsky 2024; Clark and James 2021) than our dataset. Indeed, the present data contain five times the number of observations and draw from a much more geographically diverse set of locations.

Consequently, at a minimum, the demographic characteristics of our sample are comparable to the age, gender, and prior experience working the polls that other researchers studying single states or jurisdictions have reported for their samples of poll workers.⁵ Two notable distinctions from prior work are that the present sample is more Democratic and less White than previous studies. However, the fact that our sample is far more

racially diverse than previous studies is likely a result of having a more geographically diverse sample that may increase the generalizability of the findings.

To test the first two hypotheses, we use two multilevel logit models that set the individual as the first level and the jurisdiction (county) as the second. We use multilevel models for these analyses to account for the effects jurisdictional rules, statutes, and election administrators may have on attitudes toward perceptions of difficulty stemming from newly implemented laws and respect from elected officials. Because hypothesis 3 tests individual motivations for poll workers, we estimate six logit models with fixed effects for jurisdiction.

5.1 | Explanatory Variable

The primary explanatory variable of interest is whether the poll worker had previously served as a translator for non-English-speaking voters. Poll workers were asked to check all duties they performed during the election. The question asked poll workers: “What were your duties as a poll worker in the 2020 presidential election?” Anyone who checked “Other” was given the option to specify their responsibilities. If the respondent selected that they had been a “Translator for non-English-speaking voters,” their response was coded as a 1, and 0 otherwise.⁶ For most respondents, serving as a translator was one of many duties they performed as a poll worker. A detailed list of potential duties performed is included in Supporting Information Appendix A7.

5.2 | Dependent Variables

The survey asked several questions regarding poll worker affect that we used as the dependent variables. To test the first two hypotheses, we asked poll workers how they feel about state laws governing election procedures, and how they feel elected officials view poll workers. Voters were asked to place themselves on a four-point Likert scale from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree* (coded 1 through 4) in response to the following two statements:

1. Poll workers in my county are respected and well supported by our elected officials.
2. My state has enacted laws that make it more difficult for me to perform my duties as a poll worker.

The responses were recoded into two separate dummy variables for easier interpretation. Responses were recoded so that *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* were set to (0), and *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* were coded as (1). To test the motivations of poll workers in hypothesis 3, respondents were asked, “Of these reasons, which was the most important in becoming a poll worker?” Respondents were allowed to choose one of several options to test for public service, solidary, social capital, and material benefit motivations. The options were civic duty, commitment to voting rights, interest in the election process, commitment to election integrity, interacting with friends and neighbors, and the money I am paid as a poll worker.⁷

We use the “civic duty,” “commitment to election integrity,” and “interest in the election process” responses to operationalize public service motivation, “commitment to voting rights” and “interacting with friends and neighbors” for the solidarity motivation, and “the money I am paid as a poll worker” for the material benefits motivation. We created six dummy variables to test the third hypothesis, one for each answer choice, for easier interpretation. For example, Civic Duty is coded (1) if a respondent chose “Civic Duty” as their top reason for being a poll worker, and (0) otherwise.

5.3 | Covariates

We collected responses for several demographic factors that may influence the attitudes of poll workers similar to previous scholars (see Atkeson et al. 2014; Burden and Milyo 2015; Hostetter 2016, 2020; Stein et al., 2024). The survey asks how many years a poll worker has worked. Poll workers were asked to choose one of the following answer choices regarding how long they have been a poll worker: 1 year, 2–5 years, 6–10 years, or more than 10 years. We also asked the age of the poll workers by asking them to submit their year of birth. We created a five-category scale for age where 18–25 is (1), 26–40 is (2), 41–60 is (3), 61–70 is (4), and 71+ is (5). Respondents were asked for their partisan identification: *Democrat, Republican, Independent, Non-partisan, Other (please state), or Prefer not to answer*. We included partisanship to control for the possibility that pure partisanship overwhelmed the responses to the dependent variable, especially perceptions of new laws, as well as the increased political polarization of election administration in the aftermath of the 2020 election. For the analyses, Democratic partisanship was coded so that those who responded that they were Democrats were coded as 1, and 0 otherwise. A dummy variable for gender was also created so that if a respondent reported that they self-identified as female, it was coded a (1), and (0) otherwise.

Finally, we collected the race and ethnic identity of poll workers. Respondents were asked to respond to *Yes* or *No* regarding whether they were of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin. We created a dummy variable for Latinx respondents who answered *Yes* coded a (1), and (0) otherwise. Race information was collected by asking respondents to self-identify into a racial categorization by checking as many relevant groups from the following: *White or Caucasian, Black or African American, American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Other (Please state), Prefer not to say*. Dummy variables were created for each racial and ethnic category where the respondent in that racial group was coded a (1), and (0) otherwise.

6 | Results and Analysis

We estimate two multilevel logit models in Table 1 to test Hypotheses 1 and 2.⁸ The coefficient for being a poll worker translator in Model 1 is positive and statistically insignificant controlling for all other factors in the model ($b = 1.035$, $p = 0.12$). The results do not support Hypothesis 1 as the coefficient for Model 1 is against theoretical expectations. However, the coefficient for Model 2 is in the hypothesized direction and statistically significant ($b = 0.42$, $p < 0.78$, two-tailed test, $p <$

0.05 , one-tailed test). This suggests there may be a disconnect between how PWTs and non-PWTs experience legal impediments to performing their duties. While the results in Model 1 indicate that there is no difference between PWTs and non-PWTs in their self-reported perception of respect and support from election officials, the results in Model 2 suggest that the two groups differ when it comes to the laws that make performing one's poll worker duties more difficult.

This should come as little surprise given that electoral institutions have historically had a systematic and negative impact on racial minority communities (Brady et al. 2001; Clarke 2007; Hostetter 2016; Posner 2001), and racial minorities are aware of this difference (Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin et al. 1969; Gurin et al. 1980). PWTs appear to also be aware of this historical discrimination. Indeed, PWTs self-reporting the existence of additional hurdles to do their job suggest as much.

We include marginal effects from Model 2 in Figure 1 to show the relationship between PWTs and how state laws impact the self-reported difficulty of poll worker duties. Figure 1 shows that being a PWT had a small average marginal effect on perceptions of the impact of laws on the increasing difficulty of performing their duties (an increase of 5%). This suggests that while PWTs are more likely to feel targeted by cumbersome policies passed by lawmakers than non-PWTs, the effects are relatively small compared to other individual-level characteristics.

To test Hypothesis 3, the motivations of PWTs, we estimate a series of binary logit models with fixed effects for counties. The results of these models are displayed in Table 2. Five out of the six models are statistically insignificant, and two models, Model 3 ($b = -0.397$, $p = 0.09$) and Model 6 ($b = -0.161$, $p = 0.60$), are in the opposite hypothesized direction controlling for all other factors in the models. Consistent with our expectations, we do not find support for the Material Benefits Motivation in Model 8 ($b = -0.19$, $p = 0.70$). This is interesting because although PWTs have skills beyond those of non-translating poll workers, they do not self-report being any more or less motivated by money. Model 5 ($b = 0.159$, $p = 0.59$) and Model 7 ($b = 0.26$, $p = 0.23$) are in the hypothesized direction but are statistically insignificant. This suggests that PWTs are also not motivated by solidarity benefits.

We find that PWTs are likelier than non-PWTs to self-report that their motivation to work is due to their commitment to voting rights. The coefficient for being a PWT is positive and statistically significant ($b = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$, one-tailed test). We include marginal effects to show the relationship between PWTs and their commitment to voting rights in Figure 2.

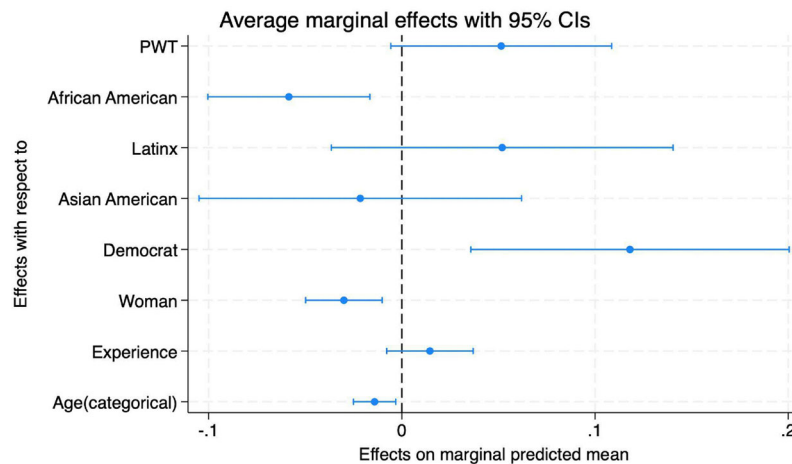
Figure 2 shows that the marginal effect for poll worker commitment to voting rights is 0.12. This means that PWTs are 12 percentage points more likely to self-report a commitment to voting rights than their non-PWT colleagues. When we include marginal probabilities and set the other factors to their mean, the effect size increases to 0.14. The marginal probabilities indicate that moving from non-PWTs (67%) to PWTs (81%) increases the likelihood of self-reporting a commitment to voting rights by 14 percentage points, representing a 21% increase in commitment. This represents a substantively and statistically significant effect on voting rights commitments between the two groups.

TABLE 1 | The effect of being a PWT on perceptions of elected officials.

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2
	Poll workers in my county are respected and well supported by our elected officials	My state has enacted laws that make it more difficult for me to perform my duties
PWT	1.035 (0.668)	0.422* (0.216)
African American	−0.296 (0.248)	−0.480*** (0.139)
Latinx	0.538 (0.338)	0.426 (0.346)
Asian American	0.869 (0.712)	−0.177 (0.348)
Democrat	0.351** (0.138)	0.969*** (0.319)
Woman	0.318** (0.137)	−0.246*** (0.0622)
Experience	0.0310 (0.0780)	0.119 (0.0925)
Age (categorical)	0.426*** (0.125)	−0.116*** (0.0376)
Constant	−0.138 (0.657)	−2.879*** (0.715)
Observations	2930	2700
Number of counties	16	16

Note: Robust standard errors are given in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

**FIGURE 1** | Marginal effects of self-reported laws making duties more difficult.

7 | Discussion

Do poll worker translators have different (1) motivations for working elections and (2) perceptions of their role as election workers compared to their non-translating colleagues? The results of

this article are mixed. Some evidence supports the hypothesis that PWTs have more solidarity motivations than other poll workers, especially regarding the commitment to voting rights. This could suggest that the type of person willing to take on additional and more complex responsibilities for little or no extra

TABLE 2 | The effect of being a PWT on motivations.

Variables	Public service and solidary motivation					Material benefits motivation
	Model 3 Civic Duty	Model 4 Commitment to voting rights	Model 5 Interest in the election process	Model 6 Commitment to election integrity	Model 7 Interacting with friends and neighbors	Model 8 The money I am paid as a poll worker
PWT	−0.397* (0.231)	0.530** (0.248)	0.159 (0.295)	−0.161 (0.303)	0.260 (0.214)	−0.190 (0.486)
African American	−0.428*** (0.115)	−0.441*** (0.142)	0.664*** (0.137)	−0.176 (0.159)	0.365*** (0.108)	−0.00146 (0.227)
Latinx	0.129 (0.193)	0.289 (0.246)	0.0761 (0.263)	−0.358 (0.234)	0.0441 (0.192)	0.123 (0.396)
Asian American	0.240 (0.253)	−0.358 (0.328)	0.00153 (0.371)	−0.453 (0.437)	−0.270 (0.274)	0.0817 (0.533)
Democrat	−0.0157 (0.0754)	0.761*** (0.103)	−0.136 (0.108)	−0.393*** (0.0997)	−0.0900 (0.0782)	−0.305** (0.151)
Woman	−0.411*** (0.0766)	0.605*** (0.107)	0.218* (0.114)	−0.157 (0.101)	0.262*** (0.0817)	0.111 (0.156)
Experience	−0.0354 (0.0419)	−0.0892 (0.0546)	−0.0132 (0.0588)	−0.0455 (0.0560)	0.255*** (0.0427)	0.171** (0.0832)
Age (categorical)	−0.0265 (0.0369)	−0.192*** (0.0459)	0.0249 (0.0533)	0.178*** (0.0507)	−0.00699 (0.0384)	−0.0981 (0.0763)
Observations	3335	3327	3335	3335	3335	3166
Number of counties	16	15	16	16	16	12

Note: Standard errors are given in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

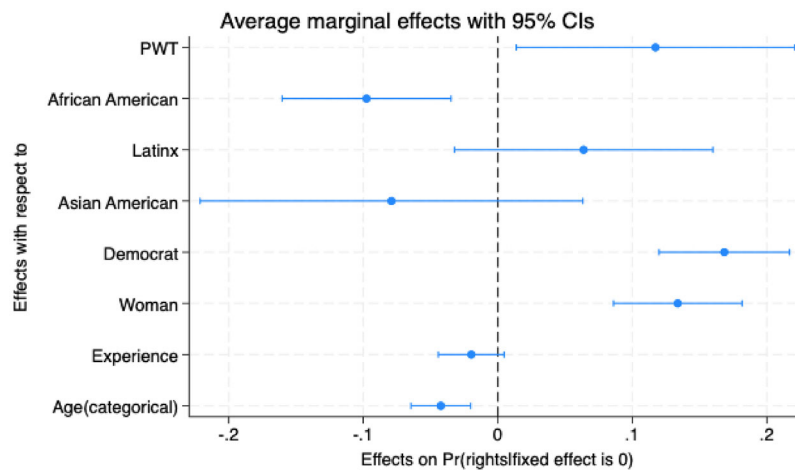


FIGURE 2 | Marginal effects of being a PWT on commitment to voting rights.

pay is more likely to do so based on intrinsically normative motivations. It is also possible that PWTs may come from the very communities where a language other than English predominates, and the perceived threats to the voting rights of non-English-speaking communities within the national discourse may further encourage these solidarity motivations among PWTs compared to poll workers who are not translators.

Previous scholars find that descriptive representation among poll workers matters for integrity and trust in the election process (King and Barnes 2019). Poll worker translators play an important role in filling this representative gap by providing translation services to those who otherwise may not receive the help they need to vote. Language barriers introduce additional hurdles for those poll workers who perform translation duties in addition to their election administration responsibilities that non-translating poll workers do not experience. Not only are PWTs unlikely to be compensated for their translation skills, but PWTs are also more likely to endure the emotional labor that comes with the difficulty of providing a positive voting experience to those who do not speak English (Clark et al. 2023). Therefore, it makes sense that PWTs self-report a higher commitment to voting rights than their non-PWT counterparts. Indeed, their willingness to take on additional work for equal pay suggests as much.

The high commitment to voting rights that motivates PWTs likely factors into how they perceive their role as a poll worker. On the one hand, self-reported perceptions of being respected and well-supported by local election officials are similar between PWTs and non-PWTs. On the other hand, PWTs were more likely to self-report that state laws make it more difficult to perform their poll worker role. We argue that this finding makes sense because it suggests that PWTs recognize a disconnect between their need to help underserved voters who do not speak English and the rules and regulations surrounding running an election. Indeed, racial minorities are aware of how electoral institutions systematically and negatively affect their communities (Brady et al. 2001; Clarke 2007; Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin et al. 1969; Gurin et al. 1980; Hostetter 2016; Posner 2001). The findings in this article suggest that this awareness extends to those poll workers who provide important translation services.

While Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act protects non-English-speaking linguistic minorities by providing translation resources, voters below the 5% threshold in American communities are not protected. In those jurisdictions below the 5% threshold, the power shifts to local election officials to determine whether to pay for and accommodate these linguistic minority voters. Therefore, whether these American citizens receive equal access to the ballot box depends on whether the election administrator expands access to information to the non-English-speaking populations in their jurisdiction. Local election officials who decide to provide these services are using resources without assistance from the state, and PWTs may recognize this imbalance in their communities.

These findings should inspire scholars to further study election personnel while providing local election officials and state lawmakers with valuable insights to guide their recruitment efforts in diversifying election staff. Although we do not propose lowering the 5% threshold as the solution, we argue that voters would benefit from language diversification efforts beyond the minimum requirements outlined in Section 203. Theoretically, this may lead to greater confidence in the democratic process (Claassen et al. 2008; Hall et al. 2009) and increase future participation rates (Alvarez et al. 2008; Kerevel 2009) for non-English-speaking voters.

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Endnotes

¹ The threshold is 3% in California and Colorado (see the U.S. Election Assistance Commission State-By-State Compendium Election Worker Laws & Statutes: https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/2023_Complete_Poll_Worker_Compendium.pdf).

²See the National Conference of State Legislatures for more information about election administration and state election laws: <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ncsl-election-resources>.

³New Jersey, for example, requires specially appointed election workers who are fluent in Spanish and are of Hispanic descent if the primary language of 10% or more of the population within a jurisdiction is Spanish (see the U.S. Election Assistance Commission State-by-State Compendium Election Worker Laws & Statutes: https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/2023_Complete_Poll_Worker_Compendium.pdf)

⁴Observations from Lubbock and Harris County had to be dropped due to inconsistent implementation of the survey resulting in difficulty merging the data.

⁵Table A8 in the Supporting Information Appendix shows the dataset characteristics used in previous studies of poll workers (see Barsky 2024; Clark and James 2021; Suttman-Lea 2020). Gender, age, and experience levels are comparable.

⁶The survey does not ask translators what languages other than English they speak nor does it ask what languages they translated while at the polling site.

⁷Respondents were also given the option “Support for my political party”; however, only 34 of the 4130 respondents chose this as an option and 0 of those were PWTs.

⁸We plot the mean scores of PWTs and non-PWTs in response to the survey items “poll workers in my county are respected and well supported by our elected officials” and “my state has enacted laws that make it more difficult for me to perform my duties as a poll worker” in Figures A1 and A2 in the Supporting Information Appendix.

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Supporting Information

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