Commentary on Section D of the Election Assistance Commission's
Election Administration and Voting Survey

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1. Introduction

This memo reviews Section D: In-Person Voting and Polling Operations" of the Election Assistance Commission's biennial *Election Administration and Voting Survey* (EAVS). Our review focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the data generated from the responses of state and local election administrators. We offer several suggestions for enhancing this section of the EAVS with additional questions might be useful to both election administrators and researchers.

As of the 2020 election cycle, Section D of the EAVS was comprised eight questions (and several sub-questions) about in-person voting, polling places, and poll workers. They are:

- D1 asks for the total number of people who cast in-person ballots cast, broken down by physical locations on Election Day (D1a) and during early voting (D1b).
- D2 asks for the total number of precincts.
- D3 and D4 ask for the number of physical polling places, broken down by election day and early voting as well as broken down by locations in election offices and places other than election offices.
- D5 and D6 ask for the number of poll workers used, again broken down by election day and early voting.
- D7 asks for a categorical breakdown of the ages of poll workers.
- D8 asks about the difficulty of obtaining poll workers.

Questions D1-D7 ask for specific quantitative data on the operations of Election Day and early in-person polling locations. D7 and D8 ask respondents for more qualitative and potentially subjective assessments and information about poll workers at these locations. Our evaluation focuses on the reliability and accuracy of the data produced from these questions and how the EAC might revise the survey to enhance the quality the instrument and the information it generates.

2. Questions D1-D7: Early and Election Day Polling Locations and Voters

Although the ordering of these questions and formatting of the questionnaire itself have evolved over the years, the basic questions have remained mostly unchanged since 2008 when the familiar lettered sections of the EAVS were introduced. This provides valuable continuity in measures over the last seven federal election cycles. We believe there is significant value in maintaining this continuity in subsequent election years.

The most significant change occurred in 2018 when questions were added about the number of people who cast ballots in-person on Election Day and early. Prior to 2018, the EAVS asked this information in section F. In 2018, the items were asked in both Section D and Section F.[1] In 2020, the items in Section F were modified so that they applied only to ballots that were actually counted, in contrast to the Section D items that refer to all ballots cast.[2]

Questions in this part of Section D have differing amounts of data completeness. Some states that had previously reported complete data on some items did not in 2020. Missing data has been especially problematic early voting, which has become an increasing share of votes cast in all states and jurisdictions. It is unfortunate to have such valuable information missing from so many jurisdictions. One might hope that better tracking systems implemented in these states will allow for more complete reporting in future elections. Until then, what might be done to make the EAVS time-series more reliable and useful to researchers?

The first challenge is that election practices, laws, and definitions differ across states, so much so that what is considered early voting in one state may be called absentee voting in another. Thus, administrators completing the EAVS may report in-person early votes as absentee in one state, and as absentee in another, even though the two modes of voting are in fact equivalent in both states. In some cases these ballots are even reported as being cast on Election Day.

To address this issue, Hamel, Leighley, and Stein (2021) first coded states as having in-person early voting or not, defined as any state which allows voters to cast a ballot in-person prior to Election Day. Using this coding, the authors re-categorized votes reported by the county as early votes as absentee, mail votes in states that did *not* in fact offer in-person early voting. Because all states offered some form of absentee voting (either excuse or no-excuse) over the 2010-2016 period of study, the authors are unable, however, to move votes recorded as absentee to early that may have actually been cast in-person. Still, care was taken to clean the data, being sure not to make changes to the raw data that they were not confident represent an error on the part of the election administrators.

The second challenge is one of missing data. Some counties and states either do not keep particular records, or for whatever reason, did not complete the EAVS. States such as Alabama and Indiana have never reported these data, other states such Georgia began reporting partway through the time period, and yet other states such as New York and Utah sometimes report nearly complete information but in other years ae entirely missing.

To assess whether the missingness in the EAVS data might affect the generalizability of the analysis, the authors compared all U.S. counties to the counties included in their analysis on several demographic, economic, and political dimensions. Though several differences were

[1] In 2018, question D4 corresponds to F1b (voted in person on Election Day) and question D5 corresponds to question F1f (voted in person early).

[2] In 2020, it should be the cases that responses to question F1b are always less than or equal to D1a (voted in person on Election Day) and responses to questions F1f are always less than or equal to question D1b (voted at in-person early voting location). The first check is failed by 92 jurisdictions and the second check is failed by 26 jurisdictions. These errors could be prevented by adding these constraints as math validation rules to the rules already used in processing the data. A lighter version of these rules was in place in 2020 that merely required that numeric values of F1b and F1b should exist if D1a and D1b were greater than zero.

statistically significant, substantively, the differences were minimal. For example, on average across all counties, 18.72% of citizens have a college degree or more. In the authors' EAVS sample, 18.25% of citizens have a college degree, on average. The rather minimal substantive differences suggest that their estimates will likely be representative of the country as a whole

The type of "cleaning" exercise employed by Hamel, Leighley and Stein could be replicated for other items in the EAVS and should be considered as a collaborative effort between the EAC and academic partners.

3. D7 and D8: Poll Worker Age and Availability

Poll worker ages are important because they indicate the longevity of the current cohort of active poll workers and thus provide insight into the pressure on election officials to identify new individuals for upcoming elections as existing poll workers become less available due to declining health. There is also suspicion that older individuals may have trouble with some of the technological demands placed on poll workers or lack the ability process voters quickly and without error at a time in life when cognitive capacities are reduced, although this deserves further study.[3] In addition, there may be benefit in recruiting younger people as poll workers if the experience generates positive attitudes about the election system that could be shared with others. Poll worker age is valuable to collect for all of these reasons and to maintain the continuity of the time series going back to 2008.

In theory ages are also easy to collect. In many states poll workers must be registered voters, so their ages could be determined by looking at their voter records. In addition, in most places poll workers are paid for their service and would need to submit employment paperwork that would include their dates of birth.

Yet we also wonder if it is worth collecting other information about poll workers for which age may serve as only a rough proxy. In particular, it may be helpful to know whether poll workers are serving for the first time or are returning to serve again. First time poll workers bring new perspectives and skills, but they also require more training, which places more demands on local election officials. It is easier to rely on existing poll workers, but they may be chosen out of convenience rather than because they are best able to implement current policies.

In a survey of Wisconsin election officials, Burden (2021) asked what percentage of poll workers were serving for the first time in 2020.[4] In communities of less than 1,000 people, fewer than one in ten were new but in communities of more than 15,000 people, more than 40% were new. The effort that election officials must devote to recruitment and training apparently varies significantly by the size of the jurisdiction, but this is not conveyed in the EAVS.

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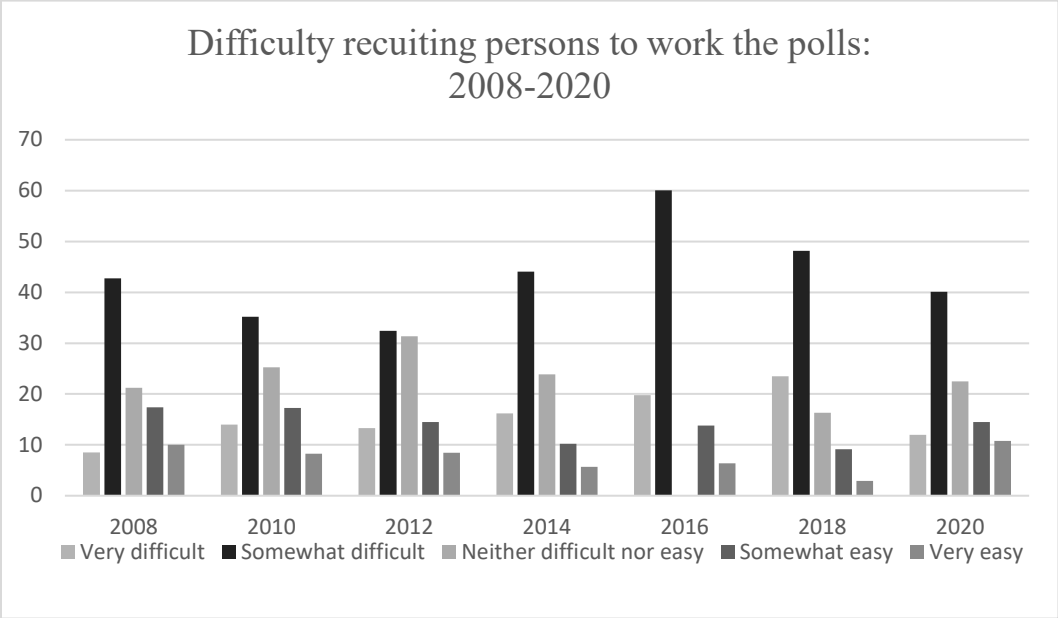
[3] Burden et al. (2017) find that fewer polling place incidents are reported when a larger share of poll workers are over age 60.

[4] The wording was, "What percentage of poll workers were serving for the first time? (Please enter a number between 0 and 100.)"

Since 2008 the EAVS has asked local election officials about the ages[5] of their poll workers and difficulty they have experienced recruiting "a sufficient number of poll workers" for each election.[6] As the figure below shows, the difficulty election officials reported recruiting persons to work the polls has risen steadily between 2008 and 2018. Moreover, there is some reason to believe the difficulty recruiting persons to work the polls waxes with high turnout presidential elections and wanes with lower turnout midterm elections.



In 2020, however, the number of jurisdictions reporting it was "very difficult" to recruit persons to work the polls dropped from 24% in 2018 to 12%. Coinciding with the drop in the number of jurisdictions reporting it was "very difficult" to recruit a sufficient number of persons to work the polls was a significant decline in the average age of the persons working the polls; from a median of 64 years before 2018 to a median age of below 60 years of age in 2020.

Research on poll worker recruitment before 2020 focused on the sources of variation in recruiting poll workers and ways to remedy what researchers perceived as a limited pool of experienced persons to work the polls. Burden and Milyo (2015) and Jones and Stein (2021) both raised concerns about how to assess responses to the EAVS questions about recruiting sufficient numbers of poll workers. Burden and Milyo offer a note of caution with using this ordinal measure:

[5] Age categories include: Under 18, 18-25, 26-40, 41-60, 61-70, 71+.

[6] Response choices include: Very difficult, Somewhat difficult, Neither difficult nor easy (not asked in 2016), Somewhat easy, and Very easy. Response rates to this question are variable over time. Hostetter (2020) reports that a number of states either refused to answer the EAVS survey or reported the data was unavailable for selected jurisdictions. Unreported states in 2018: Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, North Dakota, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington. Jones and Stein (2021:5) similarly found the same states missing for the same years, with the exception of Wisconsin in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018.

> [S]ome election administrators may have a higher tolerance for lines and confusion at the polls and so report no difficulties obtaining sufficient poll workers. Other 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. (7)

Given the potential for a dual interpretation of responses to EAVS question, Jones and Stein (2021) undertook to analyze the proportion odds assumption associated with the EAVS question about the difficulty of recruiting persons to work the polls. This assumption presumes the effects of independent variables are proportional across different categories of the question, "How difficult or easy was it for your jurisdiction to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers?" Substantively, this means that the explanatory and control variables have the same effects regardless of the response category. Their tests confirmed that the measure of difficulty to recruit poll workers does not meet the proportional odds assumption, calling into question the proper interpretation of this survey question.

Jones and Stein's analyses support Burden and Milyo's suspicions that there may be at least two related interpretations of responses to the EAVS question. The first interpretation is a simple quantitative assessment of whether there are sufficient numbers of persons to staff in-person polling locations. The second interpretation addresses whether the number of persons available to work the polls are sufficiently trained, skilled, and experienced to adequately fulfill their duties.

Before the 2020 election cycle, there was clear evidence that local jurisdictions were struggling to meet their demand for poll workers. The challenge of conducting an election during a pandemic with record voter turnout was expected to further strain local jurisdictions ability to recruit persons to work the polls. Older persons who had previously dominated the ranks of poll workers were reluctant to work in-person polling locations for fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus. In response to this challenge, local officials may have sought out new and younger persons to work the polls. This effort was supported by private and public funding that offset the loss of older and more experienced poll workers. The increase in mail-assisted voting may have further lessened the impact of fewer persons willing to work the polls in the 2020 election.

Several other trends since 2020 may place greater importance on the need for recruiting persons to work the polls. First, the pandemic may continue through subsequent elections. Alternatively, the threat from a pandemic may abate, reducing the demand for mail-assisted voting, returning many voters to in-person voting on or before Election Day. This would suggest that the recent decline in the difficulty in recruiting persons to work the polls is temporary. Finally, because a number of states adopted new laws after 2020 that place greater demands on poll workers including personal liability for violating poll watchers' access to polling locations (Brennan Center for Justice 2021). Together these trends and new laws create uncertainty about the demands for and supply of persons to work the polls. Moreover, the replacement of older workers by new and younger poll workers may suggest that the need for persons to work the polls may extend to the skills and ability of poll workers.

4. Suggested Additions to Section D

We strongly recommend not changing the wording of question D8 that asks about sufficiency of persons to work the polls. The value of maintaining the time-series associated with this question outweighs any ambiguity associated with responses to the question. To address the potential dual interpretation of responses to this question we recommend adding additional questions that probes on the nature of the problem of recruiting persons to work the polls.

We propose that the following questions or some combination of these questions we asked of all EAVS respondents following question D8. These questions were asked in a survey of Wisconsin election officials by Burden (2021) and has thus been field tested to demonstrate their viability.

- What percentage of poll workers were serving for the first time? (Please enter a number between 0 and 100.)

- Was the quality of poll workers in your jurisdiction better or worse than in the previous [presidential/midterm] election?
    - Better
    - Worse
    - The same
    - Don't know

- If you had any difficulty obtaining poll workers, was it mainly because you could not recruit enough individuals or because those individuals did not seem qualified to serve, or both?
    - Not enough individuals
    - Individuals not qualified,
    - Not enough individuals and individual not qualified
    - I had no difficulty in terms of the number or qualifications of poll workers

- Which of the following were factors that made it difficult to obtain poll workers? Check all that apply.
    - Not enough individuals willing to serve as poll workers
    - Individuals not sufficiently qualified to serve as poll workers
    - Individuals resistant to training
    - Individuals overly partisan
    - Other

An additional concern about question D8 to consider what reference or standard election officials are using when judging "difficulty." It is possible that the apparent decline in difficulty in 2020 shown above was the genuine result of more poll worker availability or was instead the result of a psychological process in which officials contrasted the situation with severe problems that occurred in spring and summer elections or relative to fears about shortages rather than to a "normal" baseline such as the prior presidential election. One of the suggested questions specifically asks officials to assess poll worker quality in relation to the prior comparable election.

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