

# Poll Workers: The Face of Elections

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A participant observational research study of  
poll workers in the 2024 General Election

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# Project summary

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This research builds on our 2014 Poll Worker and Election Integrity project, where we explored how poll worker teams interacted with various forms, ballots, and voting systems—essentially, the artifacts and machinery of elections. In this research, our focus shifted to understanding the relationships poll workers have with each other and with voters.

For many voters, the polling place is a pivotal touchpoint in their voting journey. Planning efforts, policy decisions, and operational strategies come together on this day (or multiple days, depending on each state's voting methods), leaving a lasting impression on a voter's experience.

Because elections are a crucial part of the functioning of democracy, we pondered how the culture of polling places shapes public confidence in democratic elections. By "culture of a polling place," we refer to the behaviors of poll workers in a polling place, their interactions with the space as they implement policy and procedure, and how they react to specific situations based on these policies and organizational structures. This culture directly impacts how elections are administered.

The 2024 presidential election provided an opportunity for our team to work as poll workers and observe elections up close. While a few of our team members were seasoned poll workers, the majority (7 out of 11) were serving for the first time.

We chose ethnographic participant observation as our research method because of its effectiveness in understanding contexts that are difficult to observe unless as a participant. Elections are complex systems, and it's difficult to observe them play out in real time without being actively involved. Active participation also showed us the context in which situations occur. By working as a poll worker while actively observing, we immersed ourselves in the complex layers of relationships and dependencies that are part of a polling location.

Our observational research also allowed our team to learn about different aspects of elections that we support but may not necessarily have experience in and to see how all the work we do to support elections comes to life. This level of hands-on involvement and practical experience brought a unique perspective to our team. Rather than remaining within the confines of theoretical knowledge (or on the outskirts as just observers or researchers) about election administration, we engaged in practical application. Combining this experience with our

expertise in design and research strengthens our practice and ongoing support in poll worker and polling place administration.

Our research team consisted of 11 individuals from various geographical locations across 5 states. 7 team members are based in large and diverse cities such as Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago; 2 members live in medium-sized — Montgomery County and Sacramento, where the population ranges from approximately 1 to 1.5 million. The remaining 3 members are located in smaller jurisdictions — Baltimore City, St. Louis City County, and Onondaga County — which have populations between 270,000 and 550,000. All of these jurisdictions can be considered large relative to most election offices in the United States.

According to The Elections & Voting Information Center (EVIC), our polling place locations are representative of what most American voters experience, as 75% of voters vote in jurisdictions administered by 8% of election administrators. Yet these polling places don't truly reflect the reality faced by most election administrators, since 75% of election administrators work in jurisdictions that serve just 8% of the voting population.<sup>1</sup>

In this report we present insights from our observational research and offer conversation starter questions for election officials to consider.

Our observations highlighted a few key points:

- Poll workers humanize and personalize the election process, creating a culture that shapes the voting experience.
- Elections are often the single touchpoint that connects voters to our electoral democracy, with poll workers being the “face of elections.”
- The polling places we observed succeeded not because everything was performed perfectly or there were no obstacles, but because poll workers adapted, solved problems, and facilitated the voting process. Despite issues that arose at polling places, poll workers ensured that eligible people were able to vote.
- Poll workers displayed proactive behavior when needed, implementing a process that remains secure and delightful for voters.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gronke and Paul Manson, Findings from EVIC's Elections & Voting Information Center's 2023 Survey of Local Election Officials, *Evic*, 2023, [https://evic.reed.edu/evic-news/2023\\_leo\\_survey\\_release/](https://evic.reed.edu/evic-news/2023_leo_survey_release/)

## How we ran our research

This research project was a collaborative effort involving 11 civic designers. The primary research goal was to learn how the culture of a polling place shapes and fosters trust and confidence in elections and the broader democratic process. Our research objectives for this study were to identify the relationships, social dynamics, and interactions that define the culture within a polling place. We also wanted to understand how the physical environment, technology, and policies of a polling place impact the interactions between poll workers and voters.

Given our team's geographic distribution and state-specific requirements for individuals wishing to serve as poll workers—specifically, that they must live in or be registered to vote in the state or local jurisdiction where they plan to work—we had little choice about where they worked, leading to a convenience sample of locations.

We decided on ethnographic participant observation as an approach that allowed our team of researchers to gain firsthand experience in the role of a poll worker while observing the polling place environment, culture, and interpersonal dynamics and relationships. This qualitative research method allows for people's experiences and observations to emerge as data. Our focus was on capturing the qualitative details and nuances of these experiences and learning more about the challenges and intricacies of running a polling place.

We used a field study guide for data collection on Election Day, along with an observational mapping tool to track both the experiences of poll workers and some quantitative data. Every other hour, each researcher recorded a quick summary of events. This helped them document the flow of activities throughout the day and pinpoint key moments of interaction and decision-making. In the end, we had over 550 data points to analyze. This methodology helped ensure that observations were consistent across all locations involved in this multi-site study, which spanned 7 states.

Refer to the [Appendix](#) for details on the polling places we worked and observed, observational mapping tools, and researchers' experience maps.

# The role of poll workers

In every election, over a million everyday people across the country sign up to be poll workers. They set up the polling places in the morning, supervise the election, and close voting at the end of the day. While policies, procedures, and voting systems vary across states, poll workers are the people voters interact with at the polling place—the human face of the election.

The teams of poll workers can be organized in a variety of ways. But under all these different terms, there are some basic similarities to how in-person, Election Day polling places work.

## The words we use

We have tried to use neutral terms to describe what we observed and learned, but sometimes the local dialect of elections appears in our descriptions. We've included examples of terms in the table below.

### Visual 1.1 Terminology

Words in bold are the primary terms used in this report.

Terms	Description of term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Polling place</b></li><li>• Polling site</li><li>• Poll site</li><li>• Vote center</li><li>• Voting center</li></ul>	Where people go on election day to cast a ballot
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>District</b></li><li>• "ED/AD" (election district/assembly district)</li></ul>	Divisions in a polling place for different groups of voters are usually based on the specific ballot they get.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Poll workers</b></li> <li>• Clerks</li> <li>• Inspectors</li> <li>• Judges</li> <li>• Officers</li> </ul>	<p>Titles for poll workers.</p> <p>These basic terms can be modified by the role, for example, a Check-In Clerk or Scanner Clerk, or just the word “Election”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Election office visiting the polling place (floater)</li> <li>• ADA Specialist</li> <li>• Technical Specialist or Multi Site Technician</li> <li>• Interpreters</li> <li>• Security guards or police assigned to the polling place</li> <li>• Monitors</li> </ul>	<p>Election office staff or other roles that might appear in a polling place</p>

## What poll workers do

Poll workers staff the polling place. They guide voters through the voting process. They are also responsible for meeting laws and requirements and overseeing the overall operation of the election. All poll workers might be given a generic title, such as Election Clerk or Election Judge. In jurisdictions with specialized roles, poll workers might be identified with both a general title and their specific responsibility (for example, Scanner Inspector, Information Officer).

### Visual 1.2 Assignments and titles

Role description	Assignments and responsibilities	Titles used
<b>Polling place manager</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manages the overall operation of the polling place</li> <li>• Supervises poll workers (with a designated deputy in some locations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Judge</li> <li>• Lead</li> <li>• Judge</li> <li>• Coordinator</li> <li>• Poll Manager</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensures the polling place is ready to open and oversees the set-up</li> <li>• Calls the opening and closing of polls</li> <li>• Oversees end-of-day shutdown and ballot packing to return to the election office</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site Manager</li> </ul>
<b>Voter information/greeting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides information to voters as they enter the polling place</li> <li>• Greets voters, answers questions, and directs them to the correct area (by district or last name)</li> <li>• May be positioned near the exit to collect materials (e.g., secrecy sleeves)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information Officer or Clerk</li> <li>• Greeter</li> </ul>
<b>Check-in officer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checks voters in by confirming their eligibility</li> <li>• Marks voters as having voted</li> <li>• Typically, multiple people work at the check-in tables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check-in Officer</li> <li>• ED Table Inspector</li> </ul>
<b>Ballot distribution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives voters a ballot and any necessary materials (e.g., secrecy sleeve)</li> <li>• In vote centers, may be responsible for printing ballots on demand</li> <li>• This role may be combined with check-in or be a separate position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ballot Judge (or Officer or Clerk)</li> <li>• ED table Inspector</li> </ul>
<b>Accessible voting assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps voters use the accessible voting system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BMD/Privacy Booth Inspector</li> </ul>

<b>Ballot scanning assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping voters with ballot scanning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scanner Inspector</li> </ul>
<b>Special functions</b>	Handling special functions including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provisional voting</li> <li>Looking up a voter status</li> <li>Same day registration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any trained poll worker, including lead poll worker</li> </ul>
<b>Voting system management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manages the voting system</li> <li>Usually has special training and more experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>System Operator</li> <li>System Specialist</li> </ul>

## Poll workers' roles

Depending on the laws and procedures in the jurisdiction, poll workers may be assigned to a specific role, allowed to self-select a role, or be directed to rotate between roles during the day.

As new poll workers, most of the researchers from the Center for Civic Design held entry-level positions, such as being 1 of several workers at a check-in table or monitoring the lines at the scanners to help voters when needed. There was 1 exception in Maryland, where a person who had been a poll worker several times before was assigned to be a Closing Judge, working at the end of Election Day.

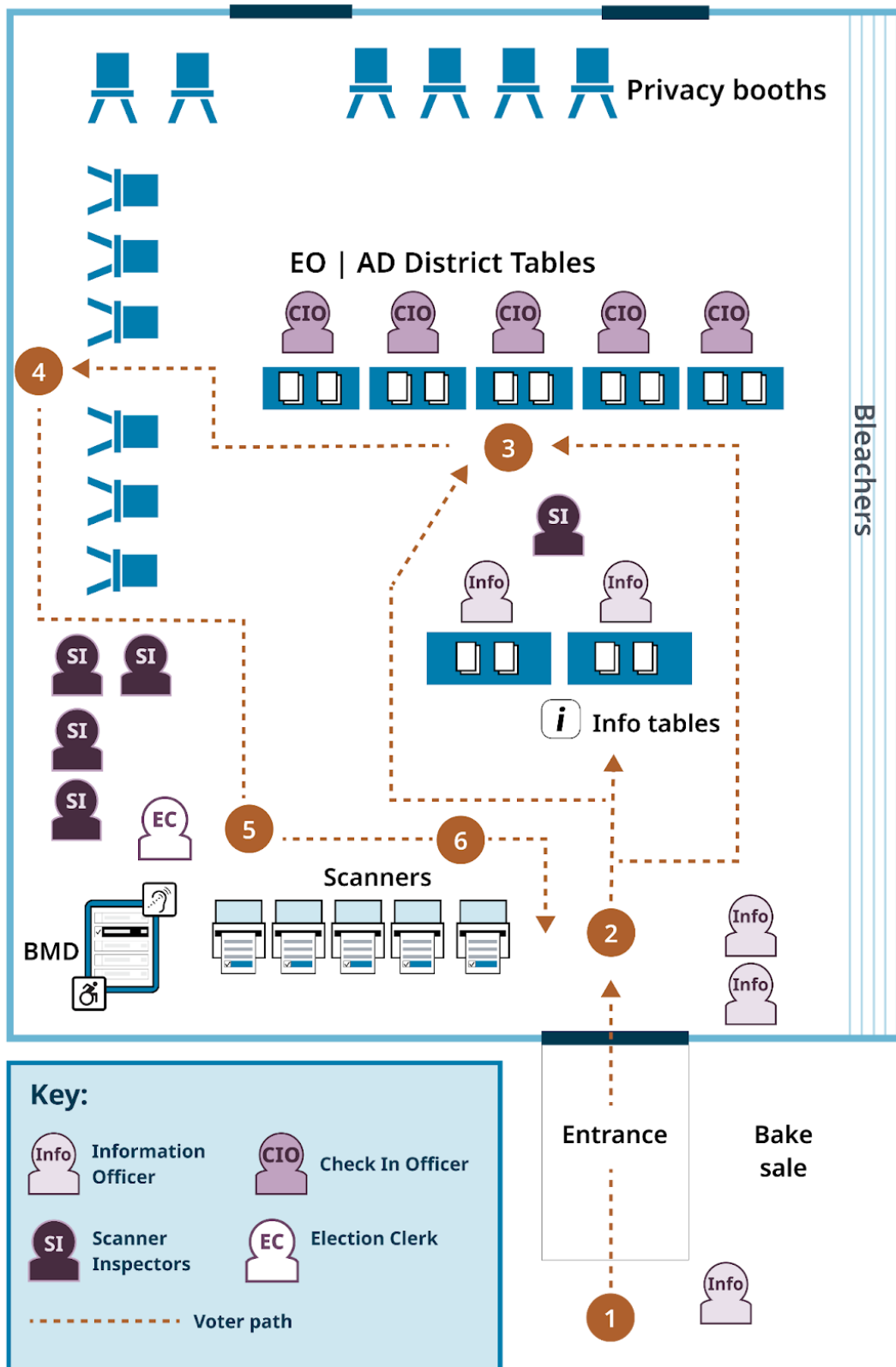
Some researchers rotated roles throughout the day. For example:

- In Chicago (Cook County), poll workers are not assigned specific stations; our researcher alternated between supporting voters with ballot scanning, checking in individuals, and distributing ballots.
- In California (Sacramento County), our researcher split their time between a check-in officer and an assisting officer.

Regardless of their assignment, poll workers adjust, adapt, and perform multiple tasks to meet the demands of the day, including covering for each other during breaks.

The assignments also determine where a poll worker is stationed. The polling place layout below shows the location of all the stations, the voters' path, and the poll workers assigned to each area.

Visual 1.3: Schematic view of a NYC polling place illustrating voter path, poll worker roles, and assignments



# Learnings

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## The face of policy

“If we can fix it, it isn't an issue.” —poll worker working on Election Day

Poll workers connect voters to our electoral democracy. They are the face of elections. Elections are a massive undertaking made possible through the coordination, work, and ingenuity of local teams of poll workers. Poll workers ensure that people vote in imperfect circumstances. On a fast-moving, busy election day, poll workers adapt to the challenges of limited resources and unexpected issues, often without readily available assistance.

In this section, we will illustrate how poll workers are the face of elections through:

1. **Fostering community and making connections.** Poll workers humanize the polling place by building community around them.
2. **Navigating policies to make decisions.** Poll workers apply policy on paper to real-world settings, meeting voter needs and ensuring ballots are cast.
3. **Facilitating the voting process behind the scenes.** Poll workers help bring the polling place to life, facilitating the voting process.

# Fostering community and making connections

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Through our research, we have gained a bigger picture of the human side of poll work. Poll workers handle more than the operational functions of a polling place. They also bring elections to life.

- **Poll workers reflect the local community and the polling place.** They reflect the surrounding community at the polling place.
- **Polling places are rooted in their local communities.** They have strong connections to the neighborhood's culture and context.
- **Poll workers create a culture of community at the polling place.** They humanize and personalize the election process, creating a positive and supportive culture for voters in the polling place.

## Poll workers reflect the local community and the polling place.

Most poll workers we worked with were residents living within the jurisdiction where they served. Many lived within just a few blocks of their polling places. Some we spoke to shared their deep roots as lifelong residents of the neighborhood. For example, 1 poll worker has been a small business owner in the community. We overheard a group of poll workers reminiscing about meeting each other for the first time at the elementary school where they were now casting their votes.

Like the local communities they represent, poll workers are multi-faceted and multidimensional. Poll workers reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Many of these dedicated poll workers were bilingual or multilingual and had accessibility needs that were supported, allowing them to participate fully. Our team also observed a number of enthusiastic young poll workers, including a few high school students. These individuals are not just assisting voters at the polls; they're an integral part of the community, embodying the diversity of the neighborhoods they serve and making our election system even more inclusive.

## Polling places are rooted in their local communities.

Every polling place had several returning poll workers, many of whom had worked in more than 1 election. This resulted in a mix of experienced and first-time poll workers. In 4 out of

our 11 polling places, several individuals had previously worked together as poll workers. In 1 polling place alone, 5 individuals knew each other and had all worked together in a past election.

We observed that returning poll workers have strong connections within their communities and are deeply rooted in and attuned to the neighborhood's culture and context. Relationships among returning poll workers varied from friendly acquaintances to close friends, whose enthusiasm in greeting each other was evident as we overheard them inquiring about family. Phrases like, "That's so and so's grandson/father," and "How's so and so?" were common as they checked in on each other's family members. An individual stopped by the polling site to say hello, even though she was not working or voting. 2 staff members recognized her and were excited to see her again.

At 1 polling place, we observed 2 poll workers who lived nearby in the same veterans' housing facility. The poll workers knew each other, as well as several veterans who came in to vote throughout the day. 1 of them made sure to reach out to a group of veterans, encouraging them to come vote and informing them about the same-day voter registration policy.

### **Poll workers create a culture of community at the polling place.**

Voters cast their ballots in places they live, work, and attend school, sometimes returning to the same place where they went to elementary school. Because poll workers often live in the community and sometimes return year after year, poll workers are familiar faces. This allows them to build relationships with voters and understand their needs, which personalizes the election experience and fosters a sense of community. All this familiarity encourages a culture of community and delight for voters on election day.

Interpersonal touch points and moments of personal attention and genuine caring at the polling places looked like:

#### **Family-like banter and playfulness**

- Poll workers gently tease each other, joking about being late in the past or asking sarcastic questions.
- At the end of the shift, poll workers hug each other and exchange numbers.

#### **Celebratory rituals**

- At 5 out of the 11 polling places we observed, poll workers cheered or clapped for first time voters.

## **Community connection and belonging**

- An experienced poll worker guided voters to their correct polling locations in ways voters instantly recognized, saying, "It's just on Ocean Parkway." Voters responded positively, saying, "Oh, I know that place." This same poll worker recognized many voters' election districts when she heard their addresses. Voters responded warmly to this knowledge of the area, their faces lighting up at the recognition and connection.

# Navigating policy to make decisions

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Poll workers navigate formal and informal hierarchy to make decisions.

## Formal hierarchy and established protocols.

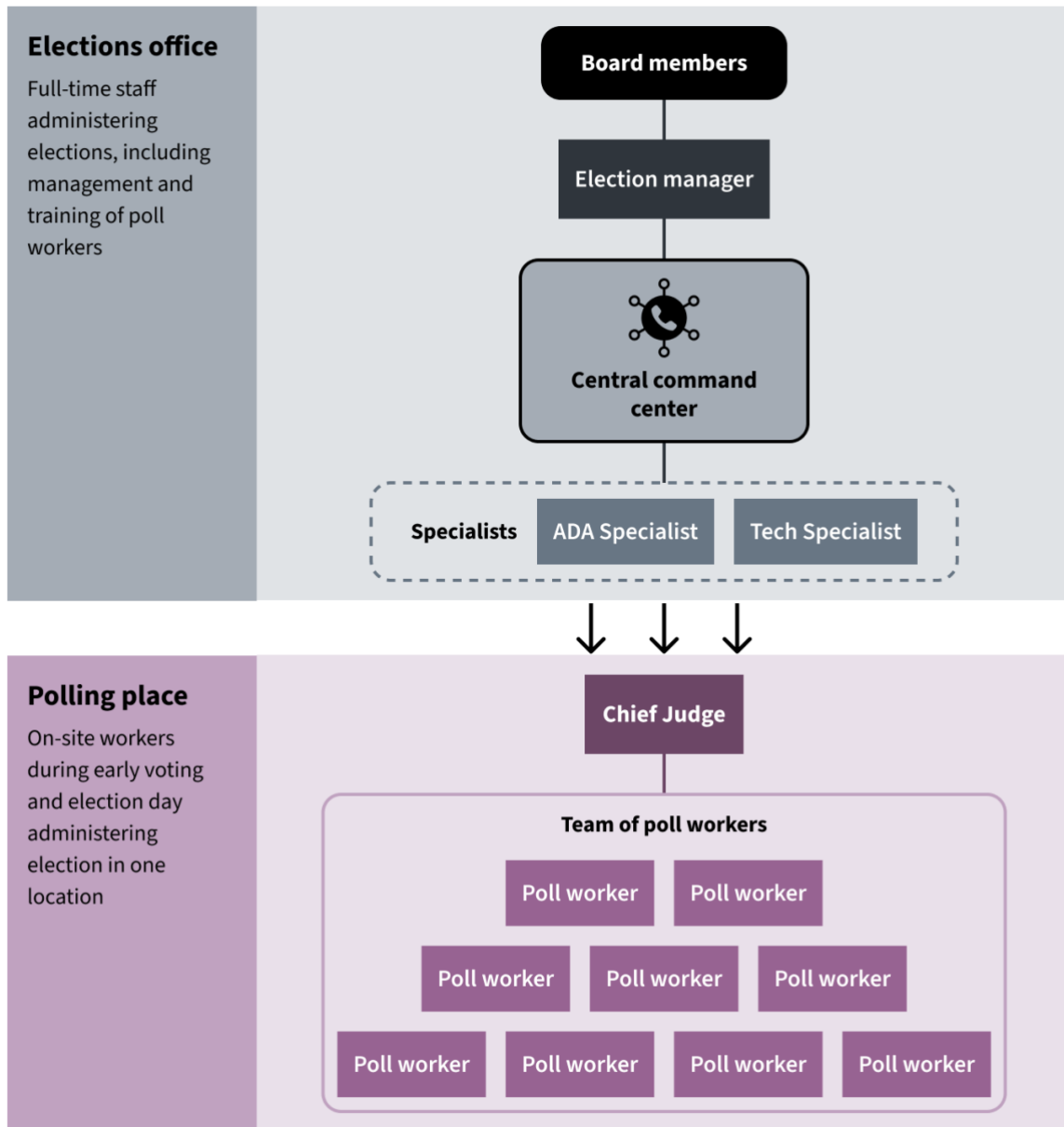
The formal hierarchy at the polling place consists primarily of the Chief Judge and offsite higher-level staff employees who help plan and coordinate all election procedures. Chief Judges have the authority to communicate with central command and oversee the poll workers. Chief Judges manage and supervise voting operations on election day, ensuring decisions are conducted in a nonpartisan manner.

While there is a traditional top-down organizational structure where the decision-making power rests at the top, poll workers operate within a model of mutual dependency. In practice, they gravitate towards "peer-to-peer" support, relying heavily on each other for immediate tasks and decision-making. This system of mutual support is crucial for healthy team function and the smooth operation of polling places.

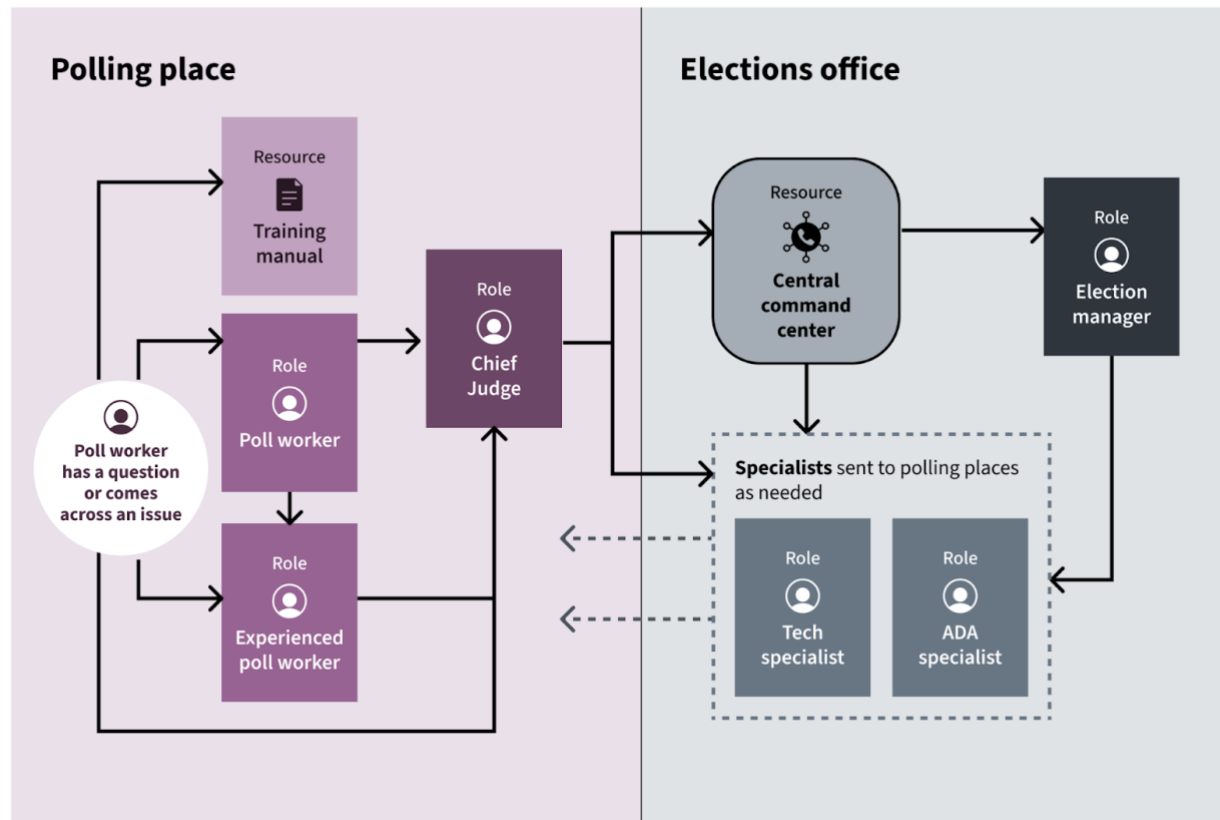
Most polling places had established escalation protocols that poll workers followed when issues arose. For minor task-related questions or immediate needs, poll workers typically refer to the training manual for guidance. When needed, they escalate questions to Chief Judges, following the established protocols. If a situation needs to be further escalated, Chief Judges call the Central Office Center. Depending on the nature of the issue, they can also bring in specific specialists, such as ADA or Technology Specialists, to address accessibility-related or technical issues.



**Visual 2.1 Overview of the standard formal organizational structure across polling places**



**Flow chart Visual 2.2: Poll worker flow chart of decision making process of protocols**



### Informal hierarchy.

At polling places, there are both formal and informal hierarchies at play. An informal hierarchy emerges between new poll workers with minimal training and experienced poll workers.

Our observations show that new poll workers generally tended to turn to fellow first-time poll workers for immediate and low-lift tasks. However, for more complex decision-making situations, they relied on experienced poll workers for guidance before escalating issues up the chain of command. Experienced poll workers are not only highly skilled but also highly adaptive. They bring a wealth of historical knowledge to the table and are often relied upon to step in and assume a leadership role when their expertise is needed.

The dynamics between formal and informal hierarchies have created moments of tension at polling places. Despite having an established decision-making hierarchy in place, experienced poll workers frequently weighed in on policy and operational decisions when they felt the directives conflicted with what they knew from past elections or how they did things in the past. 2 stories illustrate the tension between experienced poll workers and the decisions made within the formal organizational structure.

The first occurred before the polls opened in a small jurisdiction in Missouri. A disagreement arose when the Site Manager deferred to the ADA specialist about the entrance change due to weather concerns. Experienced poll workers, who had all worked the site before, feared that this change would confuse voters in their community. Tension escalated among election judges, the Site Manager, and the ADA specialist, with 1 experienced poll worker expressing doubt about the effectiveness of the change. The skepticism was influenced by the poll workers' familiarity with the site and the perception of the ADA specialist as an outsider.

Another instance highlighting this tension was when a poll worker stationed as an e-poll book check-in judge insisted on asking voters for IDs immediately, even though that approach wasn't in line with the official policy guidelines. Fortunately, no voters were turned away, but this situation created a potential misalignment that could have impacted voters' experiences.

Overall, these scenarios highlight the complexity of an experienced poll worker's role within the formal and informal hierarchical structure, requiring them to navigate significant ambiguity throughout the day. Yet they often feel compelled to advocate for their community, sometimes resulting in clashes with established policies and procedures.

### **Emergent leadership traits of experienced poll workers.**

Experienced poll workers were called upon to lead in some cases because of a lack of knowledgeable guidance among supervisors and fellow poll workers, creating a situation where experienced poll workers felt "left on our own." Examples of when experienced poll workers took charge include instances where supervisors struggled with problem-solving on the spot and when strategic prioritization was needed during conflicts.

We observed a notable difference in behavior between experienced poll workers, who may not always follow procedures strictly, and new poll workers, who tend to follow the rules closely. This difference created friction among poll workers themselves and between poll workers and their supervisors.

We wondered: What is the balance between experienced poll workers taking initiative and leading when necessary, while adhering to established protocols and official decision-making structures?

We noted a range of behaviors displayed by experienced poll workers depending on the situation across polling places.

- **An experienced poll worker intervened in another staff member's responsibility and overstepped their boundaries within existing policies and procedures.** Our

researcher saw an experienced poll worker, who had previously worked as a coordinator in past elections, become frustrated about the management of closing procedures at the end of the day. Their observations indicated that at 9 pm, which was the designated closing time, there was still 1 voter present in the polling place. The experienced poll worker intervened by raising his voice to the police to ask, "are we good to close?" despite it being the police officer's responsibility to ensure everything was in order before closing and allowing the last voter at the polling place to cast their vote.

- **A poll worker displayed emergent leadership behavior when there were gaps in the hierarchical structure.** 1 poll worker realized that the Chief judges and Ballot scanner judge had stopped conducting the hourly count of VACs (receipts that log each step of each ballot being cast). This poll worker started counting them again and discovered 2 were missing. The Chief Judge was uncertain which were missing, so an experienced poll worker took the initiative and double-checked the recount in the lobby where there was a large enough surface and a quiet space. Another poll worker then informed the Chief Judge that they "don't even know what's going on in this polling place" and prompted the poll worker doing the recount to move inside. The poll worker then moved inside, and the Chief Judge stood above them to ensure they were accurately monitored.
- **A poll worker displayed proactive behavior by addressing potential delays.** A young, energetic coordinator voiced his frustration about an issue, saying that he had "a hack to fix this without having to fill out additional paperwork." He cut the seal, opened the flaps, and resealed the cut seal. He said, "If we can fix it, it isn't an issue."

## Facilitating the voting process behind the scenes

What happens at the polling place is the culmination of an orchestration of equipment, policy decisions, procedures, and voting systems working together to create the conditions for voters. While each of these elements is essential, it is the poll workers who truly enable and bring the voting process to life.

They guide voters through the procedures, troubleshoot issues that arise, and ensure that every voter can navigate the process easily. Sometimes they even create a delightful experience along the way. They are the difference between having the right to vote and actual access to vote.

In this section, we explore the questions:

- How do poll workers facilitate the voting process for people with disabilities?
- How do bilingual poll workers support language access beyond interpretation?
- How do poll workers mitigate equipment issues to ensure all voters can access the voting process?

### **Poll workers facilitate the voting process for people with disabilities.**

Ensuring a polling place functions smoothly requires 3 tasks from poll workers:

- Managing the physical variations across different polling places
- Utilizing accessibility resources provided by the elections office
- Navigating different levels of knowledge on accessible voting equipment

Poll workers must attend to the demands of each of these, adapting to issues and needs when they come up. We looked at how these challenges impact the voting experience for people with disabilities.

### **Poll workers work within the constraints of physical structures at polling places.**

We saw a high degree of variability in physical features across the different buildings that serve as polling places. Accessibility at some locations was supported by clear pathways, accessible entranceways, and push plates and buttons to open doors.

In many cases, poll workers took ownership of facilitating access by adjusting the layout of the polling place or assisting voters. Some worked well; in others, entrances, pathways, and room sizes affected accessibility for voters with disabilities. In these instances, poll worker ingenuity and adaptability were often successful in supporting access in these polling places.

Several examples stood out as both representative of the types of challenges that arose, and the skills poll workers used to create solutions:

- **An accessible parking sign blocking a crosswalk.** At 1 polling place, an accessible parking sign was blocking the crosswalk by mistake. A poll worker noticed this and changed the location of the accessible parking sign to clear the crosswalk. This type of adjustment requires knowledge about the specifics of the location and accessibility procedures.
- **An accessible entrance located far from the voting area.** In 1 building, the accessible entrance was located at the opposite end of the polling place. Voters who

needed the ramp were not always clear that there was a separate accessible entrance. Poll workers adapted by directing them to the accessible entrance and at times, walking them to the building.

- **A small room with obstructed pathways.** Another polling place had obstructions in pathways in a small room. An ADA specialist rearranged the room to allow for more space for navigation, but was not able to remove all the obstructions. This shows that not all problems can be solved with ingenuity alone.
- **A heavy door at the accessible entrance.** At a polling place with a heavy door, wheelchair users were able to navigate up the ramp to the door but often struggled to hold the door open to enter the building. In this case, a poll worker alerted other poll workers to the issue. Poll workers went to help when they saw someone having trouble entering. However, the polling place was so consistently busy that it was challenging to ensure voters always received assistance at this entrance. In this case, the accessibility issue of the physical structure was a significant impediment to poll workers assisting voters.

### **Poll workers' availability of resources for accessible voting was generally good across polling places.**

We noted that several polling places were generally well-prepared for accessibility, with Ballot Marking Devices (BMDs) set up and ready to use, with 1 exception. 1 polling place had a hard copy list of accessibility options and features for BMDs. Multiple polling places had accessibility signage located outside and throughout the building, and sufficient poll workers were available to assist voters.

Some of the resource problems we saw were minor, for example, a missing ADA form that would have allowed poll workers to sign a statement confirming the polling place met ADA requirements.

But in other cases, decisions about equipment that poll workers could not control had a more direct impact on the voter experience.

- 1 polling place we observed was in the same building as another polling place. There was only 1 wheelchair-accessible level voting booth available for both polling places; therefore, poll workers had to redirect voters to the other polling place to vote.
- A scanner was placed too high for a wheelchair user to easily insert their ballot. Fortunately, this voter was eventually able to do so independently, but it required effort.

## **Poll workers had varying levels of knowledge about the procedures and rules for the ballot marking device (BMD), which resulted in them giving voters inconsistent or incorrect instructions.**

These gaps in knowledge directly affected not only voters with disabilities but also other voters who could benefit from accessible voting equipment. We saw these issues at 4 polling places.

- Voters who had forgotten their glasses were provided with magnifiers by poll workers. For some voters, magnification was not enough, and they had to rely on assistance from poll workers. In these cases, the use of BMDs would help.
- The head of 1 polling place discouraged poll workers from offering BMDs to voters as part of the standard process, even though some voters wanted to use the BMD because they wanted to vote more quickly.

In some cases, poll workers were able to use their knowledge of accessible equipment to fill the gaps in their knowledge. These examples also demonstrate the ability of poll workers to work together to crowdsource their knowledge for problem-solving.

- Poll workers at 1 location did not know that anyone could use the BMD or that the chair could be moved to allow access for wheelchair users. A poll worker who knew the correct information explained to them that anyone could use the BMD and how to move the chair for wheelchair users.
- Some poll workers at another location did not offer the audio feature on BMDs to voters. The poll worker who noticed this made sure to offer it to each voter they dealt with.

## **Bilingual poll workers support language access beyond interpretation.**

We observed many instances where voters received language support quickly and efficiently. These moments took various forms, including: when a voter requested language assistance and received it directly from the poll worker; when a voter requested assistance and, although the poll worker couldn't provide it, they immediately knew who at the polling station could; the use of nametags indicating the languages spoken by poll workers; and clear, visible bilingual signage at the polling place.

While these examples were present at many polling places, language access remains a complex issue that many Limited English Proficiency (LEP) voters and those who speak a language other than English continue to face at polling sites. Bilingual poll workers play a

crucial role in ensuring language access at polling places, but they are not always well-prepared for that role or given the support they need to do it well.

### **Bilingual poll workers served as informal interpreters to fill the need for more language access support.**

In polling places where the jurisdiction is required to provide support for languages under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, official support includes bilingual poll workers, translated materials, and signage. However, we saw a few situations where bilingual poll workers acted as informal interpreters because there was a need for more language access support.

These informal duties include identifying who at the polling place can provide interpretation services and communicating with a voter with a disability without formal ASL training.

- On several occasions, interpreters were not identified. Poll workers found out later in the day that interpreters were available to help voters.
- In 1 instance, a poll worker was asked for an ASL interpreter, but unfortunately, none were available onsite. As a result, the poll workers attempted to communicate with her through lip reading.

### **Effective signage reduces the responsibilities of bilingual poll workers.**

Effective signage is essential for guiding voters, especially during busy times. When key information — such as voting rights, language access, and navigation — is not clearly displayed in multiple languages, voters become confused and need assistance.

- An interpreter noticed that many people were unaware of the location of the exit. To address this, she made a sign in Spanish, English, and Chinese with the help of another interpreter.

### **Gaps in language access left voters struggling to find available support.**

In locations where the language needs of voters exceed the officially required languages, the situation was worse, especially in locations within multicultural cities. Without voting materials in the languages voters speak, poll workers could offer little support. Even when there were bilingual poll workers, it was difficult for voters to identify them.

- An interpreter in New York identified for Hindi was also referred to for Urdu and Bengali, though it was unclear if she spoke all 3 or if poll workers were directing any South Asian voter to her. A voter needing Arabic was also sent to her, raising concerns about language coordination.



No matter how enthusiastically poll workers offer language assistance, there is also a cost. Translation and interpretation take both time and energy. Managing multiple responsibilities can lead to stress, inefficiencies, and potential gaps in voter assistance. For example:

- In 1 polling place, we observed how a poll worker served as the Spanish interpreter and assisted voters across 2 nearby precincts, splitting time and energy between 2 different polling sites and language needs.

These problems affect the voter experience. Without a formal, structured program for language access, voters with language needs may not receive consistent or comprehensive assistance throughout the voting process.

**Poll workers mitigate equipment issues to ensure every voter can access the voting process.**

**Poll workers manage equipment malfunctions to ensure voters can cast their ballots.**

We observed equipment malfunctions at 8 polling places. These issues required poll workers to respond quickly and create workarounds in some cases, resulting in delays opening the site, longer lines, and adaptations to usual procedures.

- At 1 location, the e-poll books would not connect to the internet, resulting in a delay in issuing ballots when the polling place opened. The site coordinator called IT and announced the issue to voters standing in line. Some poll workers answered voters' questions about the delay. The issue was fixed 15 minutes after the location opened. Poll workers used quick action and communication to mitigate the issue.
- At another polling place, the e-poll book software did not recognize voter addresses. Poll workers worked together to format addresses so they would be recognizable by the software. At times, this process would cause the equipment to stop working and require restarting.

**Issues during the scanning phase of voting can be a final pain point in the voter journey as well as a site of celebration.**

We observed a lot of activity around scanners. Some activity was the result of issues with and confusion around scanners. Scanners were also, at times, the site of celebrations around voting.

In some cases, voters experienced scanner malfunctions.

- A scanner at 1 location had a paper jam. The site coordinator did not know how to fix the issue, so a poll worker used the manual to fix the jam and was able to reprint the opening tapes.

We also noted voter confusion around the use of scanners. Voters showed uncertainty about:

- Voters at 1 polling place had questions about proper ballot marking or had to mark new ballots because of marking issues. Poll workers at the scanners assisted voters in getting new ballots when necessary and reminded voters to mark both sides of the ballots to reduce scanner issues. At another polling place, multiple voters asked for assistance on the correct orientation for inserting ballots. Poll workers began instructing voters when they arrived at the scanner to avoid issues.

We also observed issues with wayfinding to scanners. For example:

- At 1 polling place, multiple voters returned to previous stations for a second round of directions to scanners.
- Voters at another location were also unsure where to go after scanning their ballots.

When issues arose with scanners, poll workers provided instructions to avoid common mistakes, reassured voters that many people had questions about scanning ballots, and directed voters in advance to help avoid common issues with wayfinding.

Moments of celebration also happened at scanners. For example:

- At multiple polling places, poll workers clapped and cheered after first-time voters cast ballots.
- At 1 polling place, poll workers offered to take photos of first-time voters.

# Conversation starters for election administrators to reflect on poll worker training

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These conversation starters are intended to encourage election administrators to reflect on their poll worker training operations.

As you reflect and consider how to train poll workers, we offer a series of provoking questions that arise from our research findings. We hope these questions serve as a valuable starting point for your discussions.

We organized the questions based on our findings, each question corresponding to a specific section in our report.

## Fostering community and making connections

Our research illustrates how poll workers not only operationalize the polling place but also bring it to life for voters.

- How can we further encourage and leverage the sense of community poll workers bring?
- How can we promote and highlight the role of poll workers in making community connections?
- Are there any personal touches or elements of local culture we can encourage and invite poll workers to share?

## Navigating policy to make decisions

We saw how experienced poll workers are heavily relied upon on election day. They are essential for the smooth functioning of a polling place.

- What specific training do experienced poll workers need compared to new poll workers?
- How can the knowledge of experienced poll workers be leveraged? What steps can we take to capture and disseminate this knowledge to ensure it's readily available on election day?
- How can we encourage and develop emergent leadership behavior among poll workers? Are there mentorship opportunities that can help foster this?
- What mindsets contribute to successful emergent leadership behaviors in poll workers?

- How can training emphasize proactiveness in troubleshooting and problem-solving skills? How can training strengthen the capacity for poll workers to be collaborative with each other?

## **Poll workers facilitating the voting process**

We saw poll workers facilitating the voting process for people with disabilities.

- What types of poll worker training can help to support accessibility?
- How can input from people with disabilities be included in poll worker professional development?
- What would a cheat sheet for addressing access issues for poll workers include?
- How can poll workers be supported in building on problem-solving skills and working from a mindset of adaptability and creative solution-building?

## **Bilingual poll workers support language access beyond interpretation.**

We observed effective language support for voters at polling places. However, although bilingual poll workers are essential, they could benefit from proper preparation and more support for their roles.

- What specific training can help prepare and support bilingual poll workers?
- What steps can be taken to ensure there is a smooth communication process when coordinating and clarifying the roles of interpreters and language access roles for both fellow poll workers and voters?
- How can we establish a formal process for implementing language access at polling places that fall under federal requirements?
- What resources or processes can be developed to support voters whose languages do not fall under federal requirements but are close to reaching that threshold?

## **Poll workers mitigate equipment issues to ensure every voter can access the voting process.**

- What training can support poll workers in addressing equipment issues through hands-on practice with machines, for example?
- What processes at the polling place will assist poll workers in keeping track of and mitigating issues?

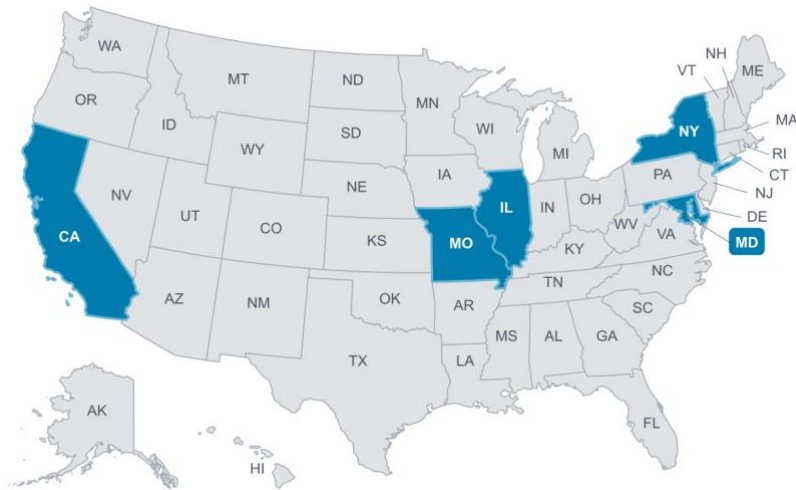
# Appendix

## Researcher overview

*Snapshot of polling places we worked and observed*

📍 **5 States**

👤 **11 Researchers**



## States and roles

California (2)

1. Election Clerk
2. Check-in Officer + Tagalog language assistant

Illinois (2)

1. Election Judge
2. Election Judge + Chinese language assistant

Maryland (2)

1. Election Judge
2. Closing Judge



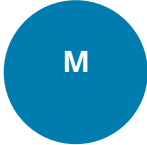
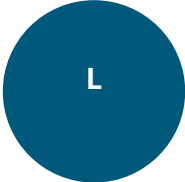
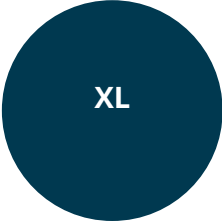
Missouri (1)

1. Ballot Judge

New York (4)

1. Scanner Inspector
2. Scanner Inspector
3. Information Clerk
4. Inspector



Legend and sources for the following tables

Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP)	5,000 or fewer	5,001 – 25,000	25,001 – 100,000	100,001 – 250,000	250,000+
Jurisdiction size	Smallest	Small	Medium	Large	Largest
					

Sources

- Registered voter data: per county election data
  - Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) Special Tabulation from the 2019-2023 5-Year American Community Survey
  - Equipment data: Verified Voting [The Verifier — Voting Equipment — November 2026](#)
- Language requirement: Official 2021 Federal Register Notice Listing Covered Jurisdictions [Federal Register Notice Vol. 86, No. 233](#) + county election website

## California researchers (2)

Researcher	1	2
County	Los Angeles	Sacramento
Registered voters	5,654,222	869,219
Jurisdiction size based on CVAP	 6,386,435	 1,099,450
Voting Scanner	Los Angeles County VSAP BMD	Dominion ImageCast Central
Voting BMD	Los Angeles County VSAP Tally	Dominion ImageCast X BMD
Voting Pollbook	KNOWiNK Poll Pad	DFM EIMS (E-poll book)

Researcher	1	2
Were ballots available in other languages? If so, what languages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Armenian</li> <li>• Bengali</li> <li>• Burmese</li> <li>• Cambodian</li> <li>• Chinese (includes Taiwanese)</li> <li>• Farsi</li> <li>• Filipino</li> <li>• Gujarati</li> <li>• Hindi</li> <li>• Hispanic</li> <li>• Indonesian</li> <li>• Japanese</li> <li>• Khmer</li> <li>• Korean</li> <li>• Mongolian</li> <li>• Persian</li> <li>• Russian</li> <li>• Telugu</li> <li>• Thai</li> <li>• Vietnamese</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spanish</li> <li>• Chinese</li> <li>• Vietnamese</li> </ul> <p>Several language available in the software system (print to order).</p>

## What was new for California in 2024?

Same-day registration on first day of early voting. A voter who wishes to use same-day registration must complete a provisional ballot and its accompanying affidavit, which already requires all of the information necessary to register a person to vote. This is what advocates call a "golden day" - when you can register and vote on the same day.



## Which languages does California require voting materials to be available in?

Varies by county. The lists include languages required in Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act and CA Elections Code section 14201.



### Los Angeles (bold = federal requirement):

- Armenian
- Bengali
- Burmese
- **Cambodian**
- **Chinese (includes Taiwanese)**
- Farsi
- **Filipino**
- Gujarati
- Hindi
- **Hispanic**
- Indonesian
- Japanese
- Khmer
- **Korean**
- Mongolian
- Persian
- Russian
- Telugu
- Thai
- **Vietnamese**

### Sacramento (bold = federal requirements):

- **Chinese**
- Filipino
- Hindi
- Hmong
- Japanese
- Korean
- Laotian
- Mien
- Punjabi
- **Spanish**
- Telugu
- Urdu
- **Vietnamese**

## Illinois researchers (2)

Researcher	1	2
County	Cook County	City of Chicago
Registered voters	1,640,040	1,464,098
Jurisdiction size based on CVAP		
Voting Scanner	Dominion ImageCast Precinct	Dominion ImageCast Precinct
Voting BMD	Dominion ImageCast X BMD	Dominion ImageCast X BMD
Voting Pollbook	ES&S ExpressPoll	ES&S ExpressPoll

<p><b>Were ballots available in other languages? If so, what languages?</b></p>	<p>For paper ballots: bilingual Spanish/English</p> <p>For BMD: English, Spanish, Chinese (audio Mandarin), Hindi, Korean, Tagalog, Polish, Gujarati, Urdu, Ukrainian, Arabic, Russian</p>	<p>The paper ballots are either bilingual English/Chinese or English/Spanish.</p> <p>For BMD: English, Spanish, Chinese (audio Mandarin), Hindi, Korean, Tagalog, Polish, Gujarati, Urdu, Ukrainian, Arabic, Russian</p>
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## What was new for Illinois in 2024?

Accessibility - Curbside voting must be offered at all vote centers.

## Which languages does Illinois require voting materials to be available in?

Varies by county.



### Cook County (bold = federal requirements):

- Arabic
- Gujarati
- **Hindi**
- Korean
- **Mandarin**
- Polish
- Russian
- **Spanish**
- Tagalog
- Ukrainian
- Urdu

### City of Chicago (bold = federal requirements):

- **Hindi**
- Korean
- **Mandarin**
- Polish
- **Spanish**
- Tagalog

## Maryland researchers (2)

Researcher	1	2
County	City of Baltimore	Montgomery County
Registered voters	557,503	1,069,288
Jurisdiction size based on CVAP	 432,645	 684,775
Voting Scanner	ES&S DS200	ES&S DS200
Voting BMD	ES&S ExpressVote	ES&S ExpressVote
Voting Pollbook	ES&S ExpressPoll	ES&S ExpressPoll

Were ballots available in other languages? If so, what languages?	No	Spanish
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### What was new for Maryland in 2024?

N/A

### Which languages does Maryland require voting materials to be available in?

Baltimore City: none

Montgomery: Spanish (203 requirement)

# Missouri (1)

Researcher	1
County	St. Louis City (County)
Registered voters	219,641
Jurisdiction size based on CVAP	<div><div>L</div><div>228,515</div></div>
Voting Scanner	Hart InterCivic Verity Scan
Voting BMD	Hart InterCivic Verity Touch Writer
Voting Pollbook	KNOWiNK Poll Pad

**Were ballots available in other languages? If so, what languages?**

No





**What was new for Missouri in 2024?**

Limited access to ballot drop boxes

**Which languages does Missouri require voting materials to be available in?**

None

## New York researchers (4)

Researcher	1	2	3	4
County	Kings	Kings	New York	Onondaga
Registered voters	1,598,744	1,598,744	1,100,984	328,769
Jurisdiction size based on CVAP	 1,725,395	 1,725,395	 1,199,925	 358,875
Voting Scanner	ES&S DS200	ES&S DS200	ES&S DS200	Clear Ballot ClearCast
Voting BMD	ES&S AutoMARK	ES&S AutoMARK	ES&S AutoMARK	Clear Ballot ClearMark
Voting Pollbook	KNOWiNK Poll Pad	KNOWiNK Poll Pad	KNOWiNK Poll Pad	KNOWiNK Poll Pad



<b>Were ballots available in other languages? If so, what languages?</b>	Tri-lingual ballots English/Spanish/ Chinese ballot	Tri-lingual ballots English/Spanish/ Chinese ballot	English/Spanish	English / Spanish
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## What was new for New York in 2024?

Same-day registration on the first day of early voting. A voter who wishes to use same-day registration must complete a provisional ballot and its accompanying affidavit, which already requires all of the information necessary to register a person to vote. This is what advocates call a "golden day" - when you can register and vote on the same day.

## Which languages does New York require voting materials to be available in?

This varies by borough. The lists include languages required in Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act and the NYC Civic Engagement Commission (NYCCEC).

### Kings County - varies by polling place (bold = federal requirement):

- Arabic
- Bengali
- **Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin)**
- French
- Haitian
- Creole
- Italian
- Korean
- Polish
- Russian
- **Spanish**
- Urdu
- Yiddish

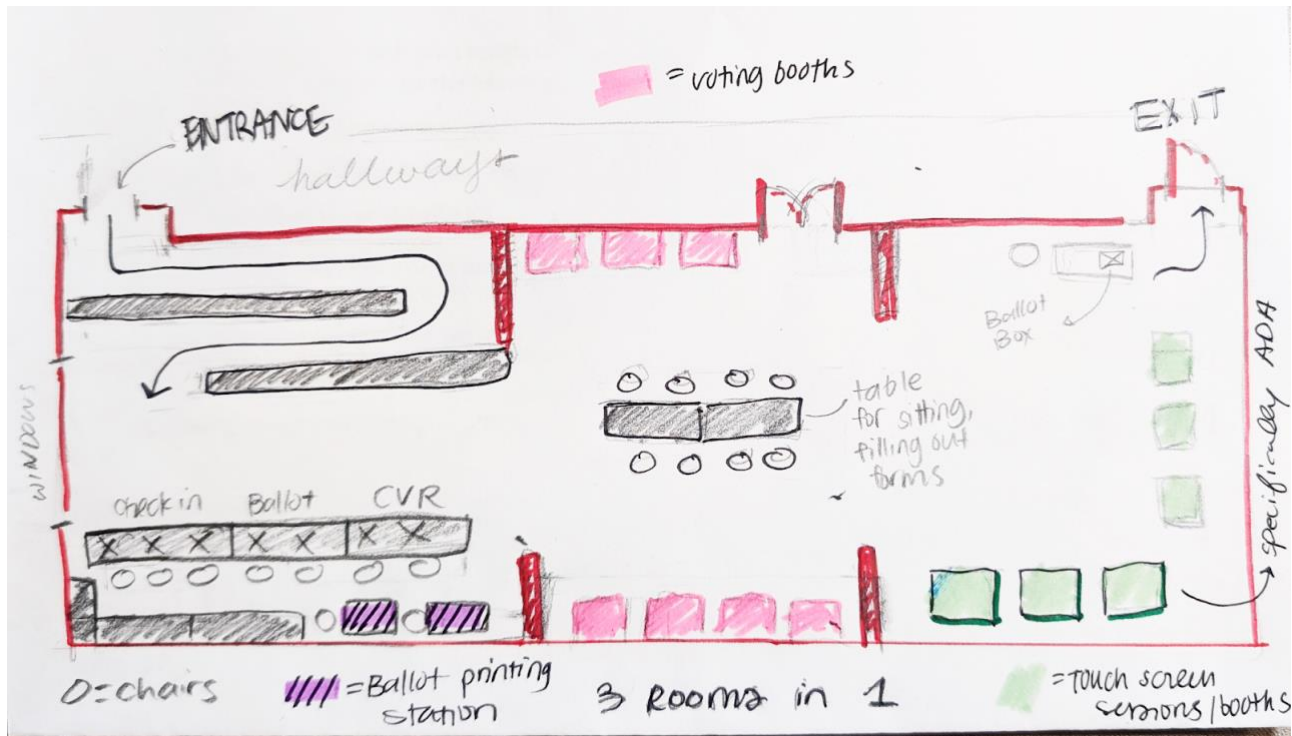
**New York County - varies by polling place (bold = federal requirement):**

- Arabic
- Bengali
- **Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin)**
- French
- Haitian
- Creole
- Italian
- Korean
- Polish
- Russian
- **Spanish**
- Urdu
- Yiddish

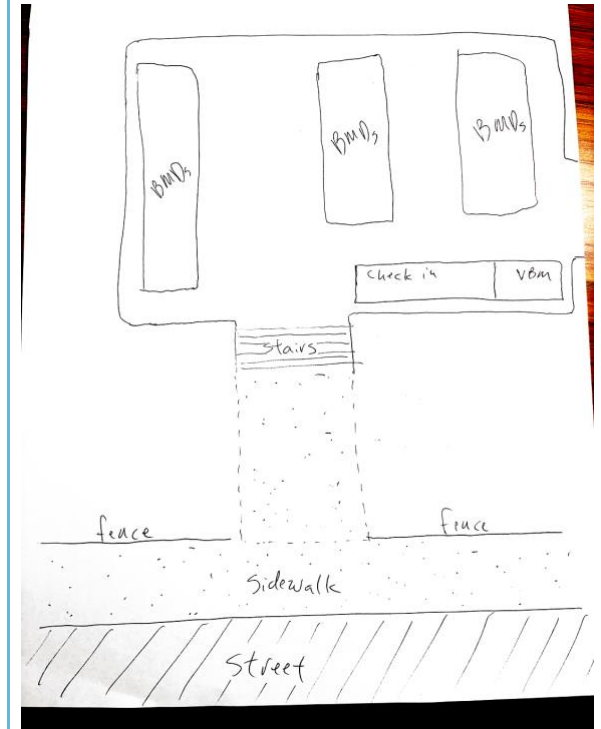
**Onondaga County: none**

# Polling place layout sketches

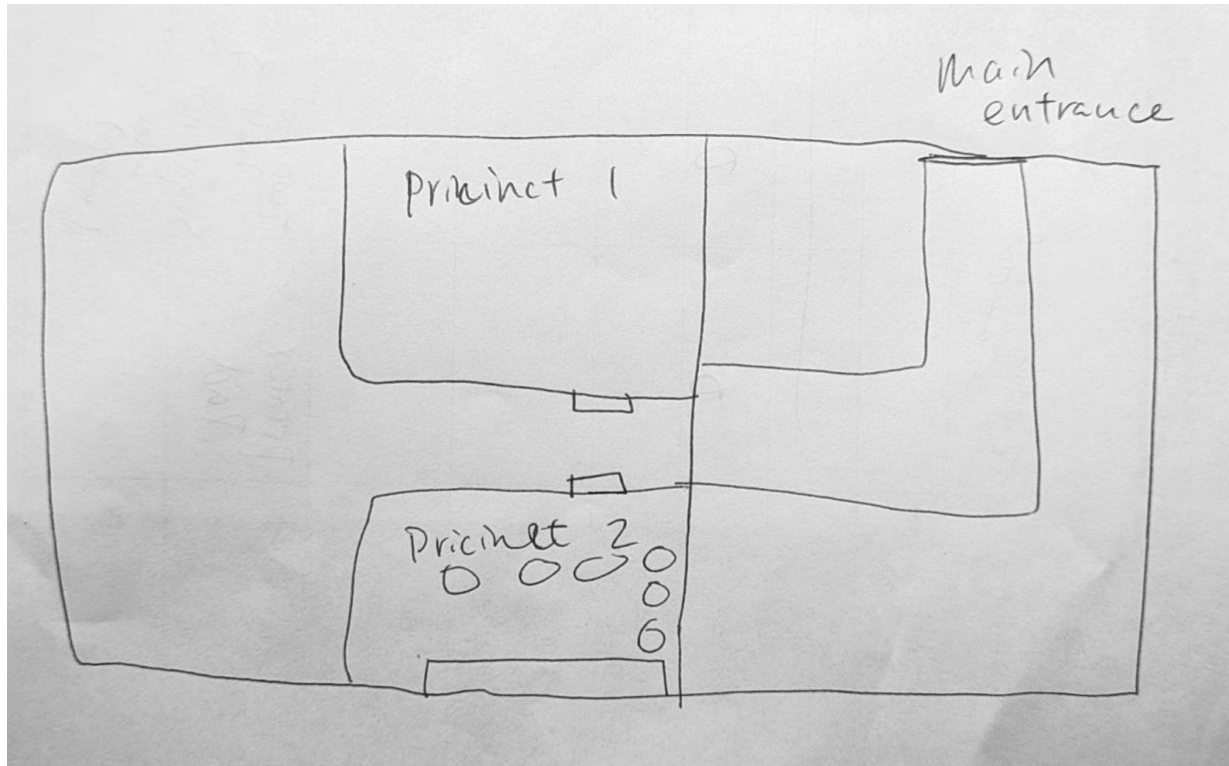
## California



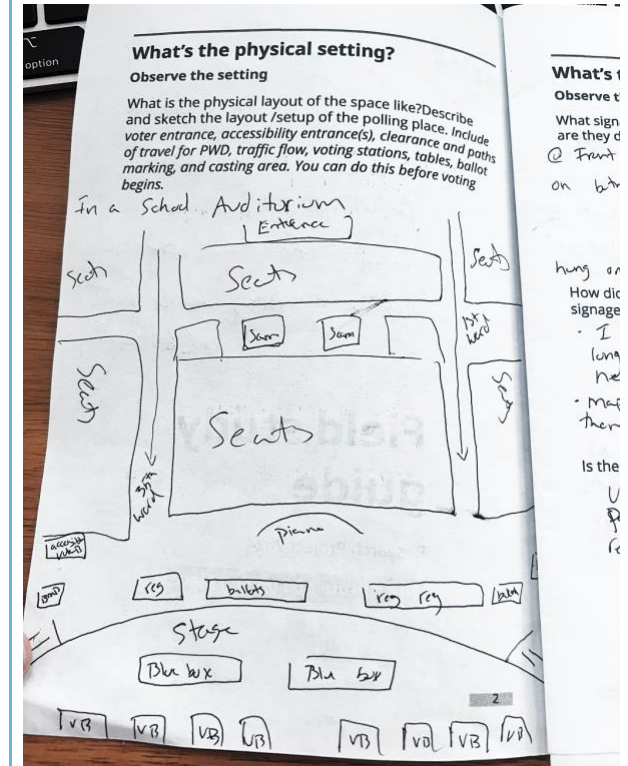
Sacramento, Researcher 11



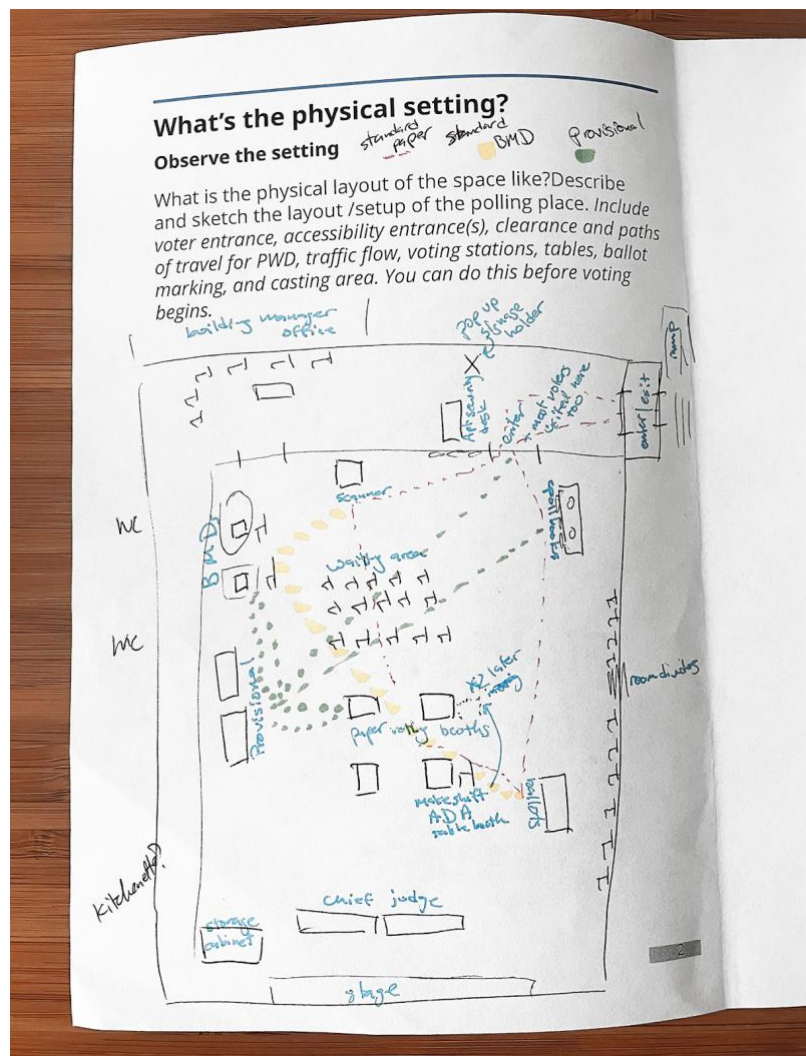
Los Angeles, Researcher 5



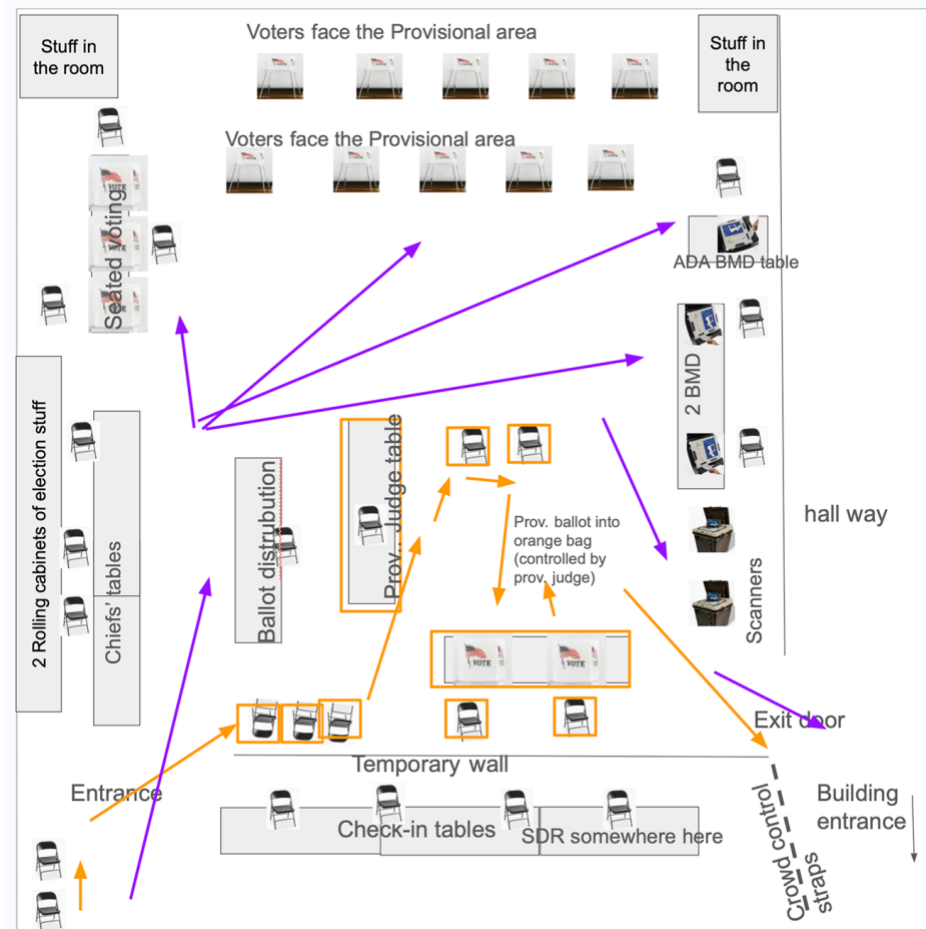
City of Chicago, Researcher 6



City of Chicago, Researcher 4



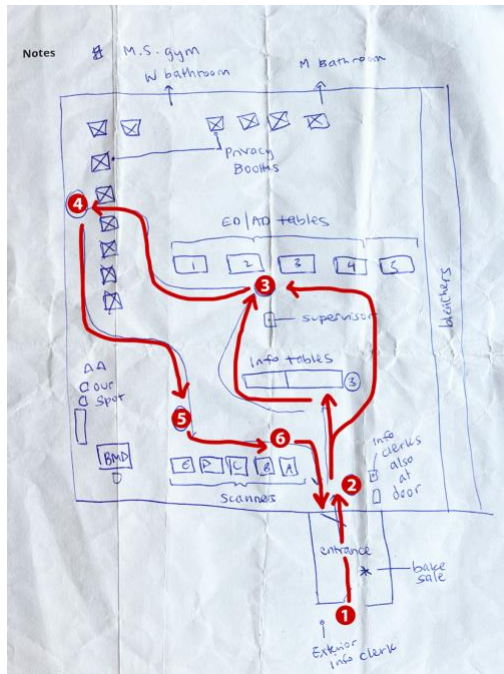
### Baltimore City, Researcher 8



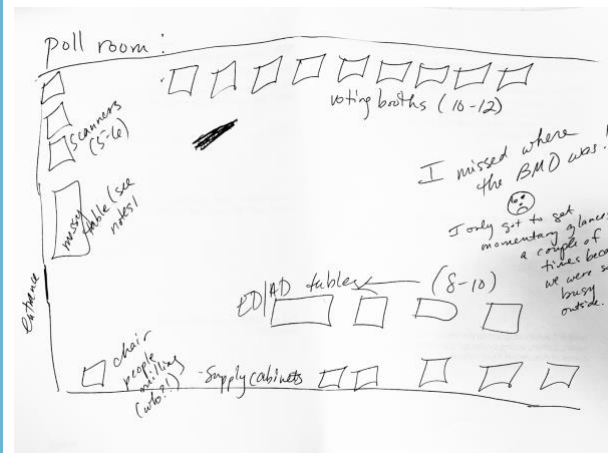
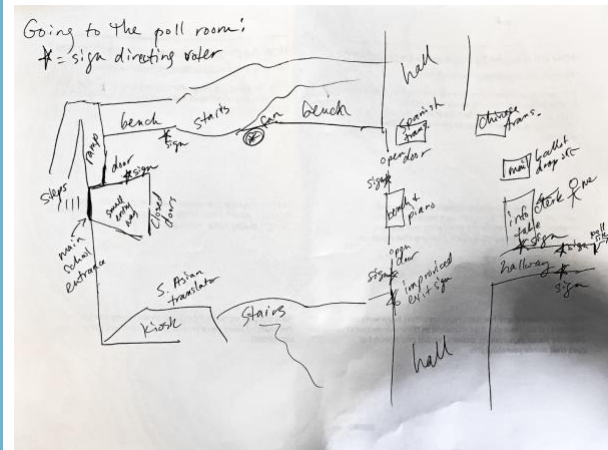
### Montgomery, Researcher 9



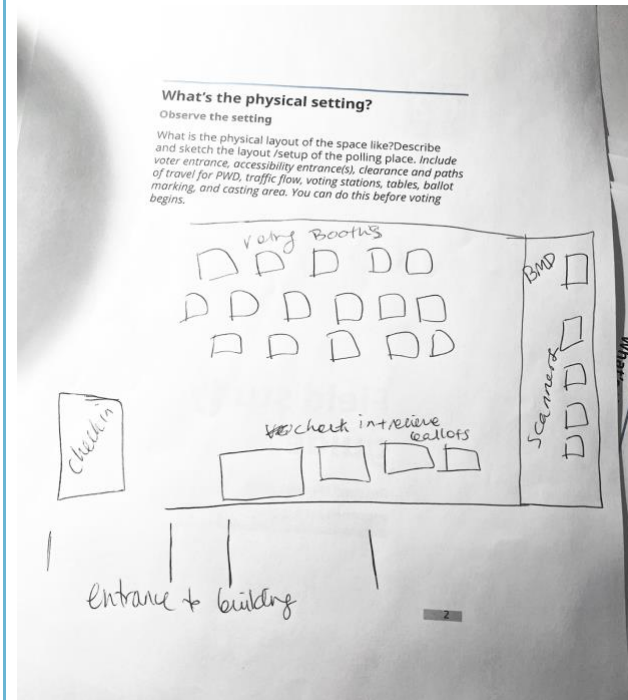
## New York



## NYC, Researcher 1



### NYC, Researcher 3

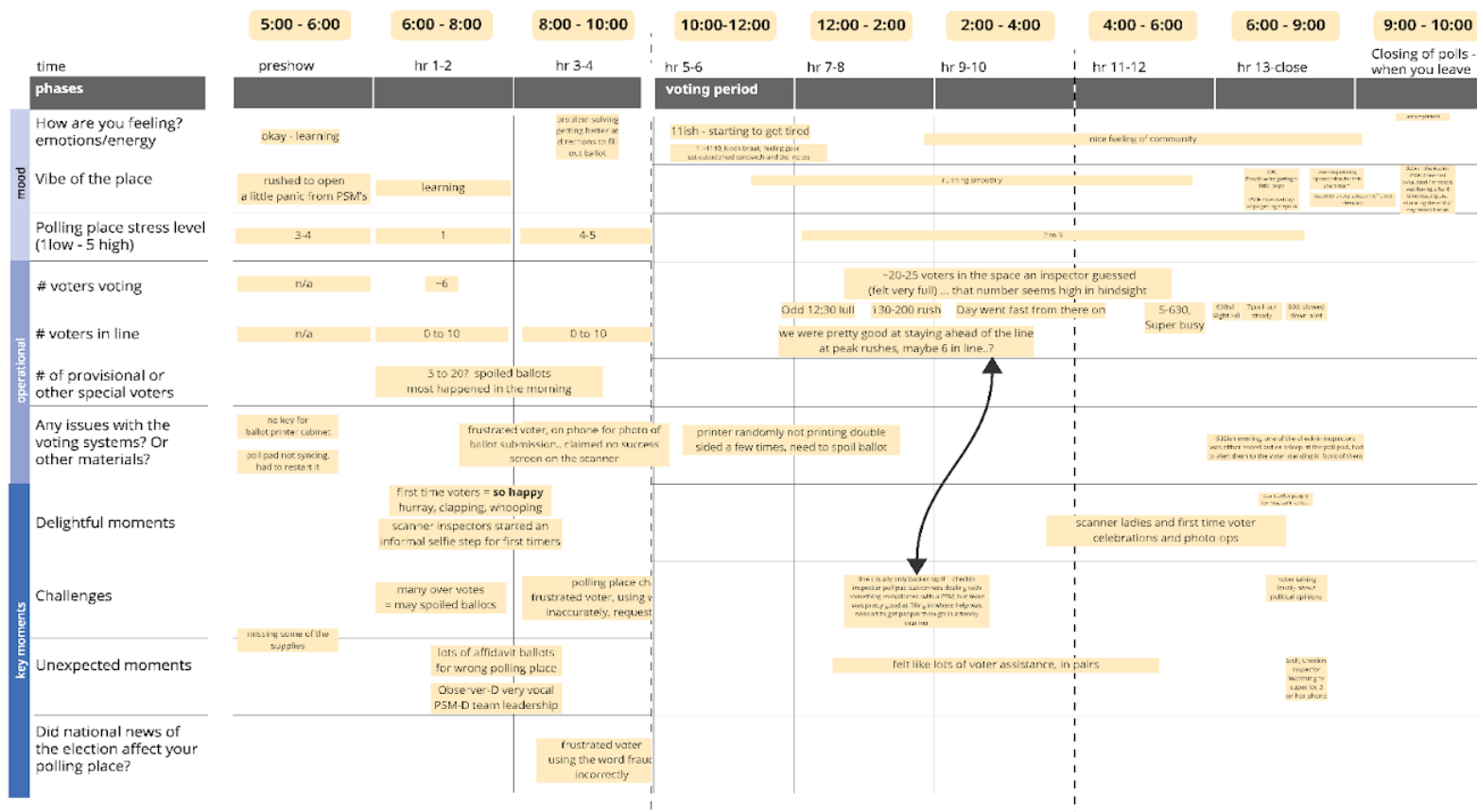


## NYC, Researcher 7

# Observational mapping tool

We used an observational mapping tool to track our experiences as poll workers on a bi-hourly basis. We also used it to record quantitative data such as the number of voters in line or at the polling place, number of provisional voters, and issues that occurred with voting systems or other equipment. This tool allowed our team to see a snapshot view of each poll worker, along with details.

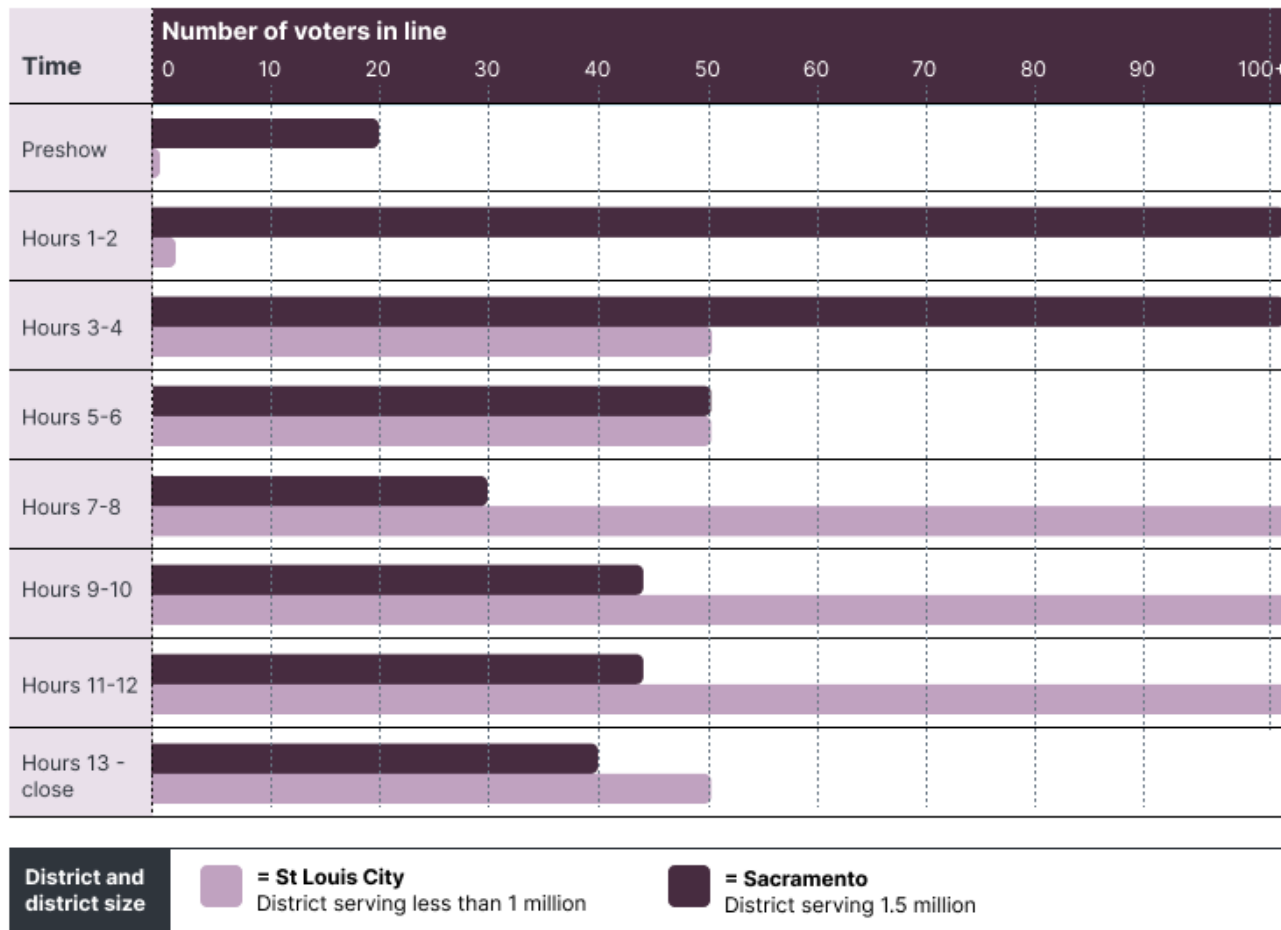
	11-12 hr 5-6	1-2 hr 7-8	3-4 hr 9-10	5-6 hr 11-12	7-8 hr 13: close	9-10:30 Closing of polls - when you leave
How are you feeling? (mood/energy)	hungry	thirsty, tired	Tired	light headed, eye's tired	exhausted, tired	stressed
Vibe of the place	BUSY, picking up	BUSY - (line long)	4-5	BUSY!!!	STEADY!	ready to finish
Polling place stress level (How - 5 high)	4	4-5	4-5	4-5	4	5
# voters voting	35	180+	35	20?	4	10-15
# voters in line	50	30	140	200		
Provisional or other special voters	25					
Any issues with the voting systems? Or other materials?	needed materials	Pause a few times for	Started to do CVR in line	NO folks		
Delightful moments	A to ballot box affected to allow PRAR	Put out	A lot of first-time voters	Sunset take a break		
Challenges		2 HR wait times	Election clerks leaving	too many CVRS	Adapted ballot station to CVR station	How many to do a last vote counting types
Unexpected moments	People thanking you	PPR not coming back in time from break	address mistakes	complimented on how well		
Did national news of the election affect your polling place?						



Our researchers then transformed their handwritten observational map into a digital document. This step provided an opportunity for analysis, allowing us to examine our data within a broader context. This approach helped uncover connections that might have been overlooked if we had relied solely on their experiences of the day.



## Length of voter lines in Sacramento and St. Louis City



Through this approach, we analyzed and visualized the quantitative data we captured. This map illustrates the number of voters in line every 2 hours in both a large district with a population of 1.5 million (Sacramento) and our smallest jurisdiction, St. Louis City County, which has a population of approximately 272,000. In St. Louis City, the lines began forming as soon as the polling place opened. In contrast, Sacramento experienced a busier period during the last 3 hours before closing. On average, voter line length remains consistent regardless of district size, though the arrival time varies.

# Emotional Journey Map

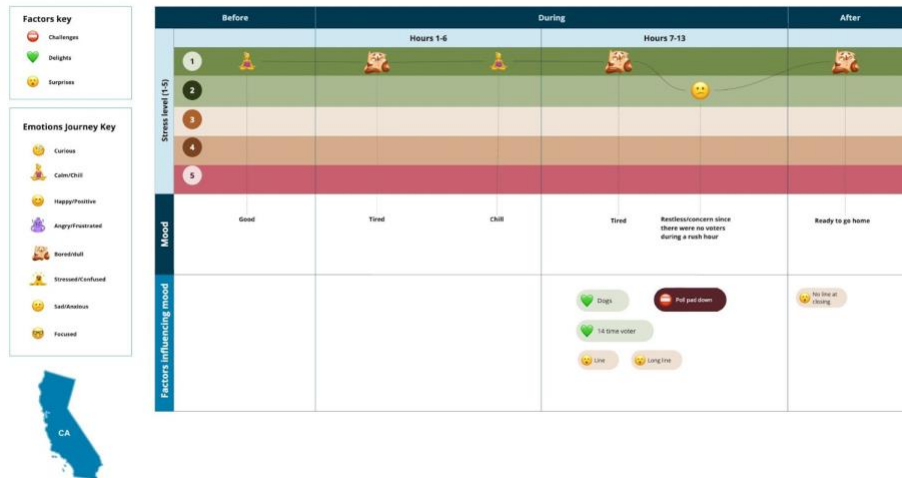
## Researchers' experience maps

Through the qualitative data collected using our observational tool, we gathered the experiences of our researchers at various polling places and created a detailed experience map. This process revealed a distinct rhythm across polling places, highlighting the varying intensity of experiences encountered throughout the day.

Below, you will find 8 experience maps that offer valuable insights into the ebb and flow of activity. Among our 11 researchers, 3 were unable to gather these data points as they were at particularly busy polling locations. This disparity emphasizes how the experience of a poll worker can fluctuate significantly depending on location and time.

### California

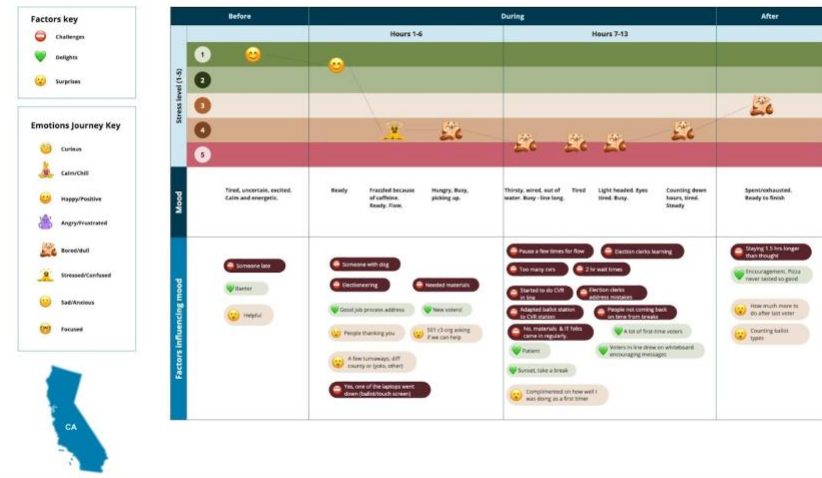
Researcher 5, Election Clerk - California



Researcher 5, Election Clerk

[View full map here](#)

Researcher 11, Check-in Officer - California

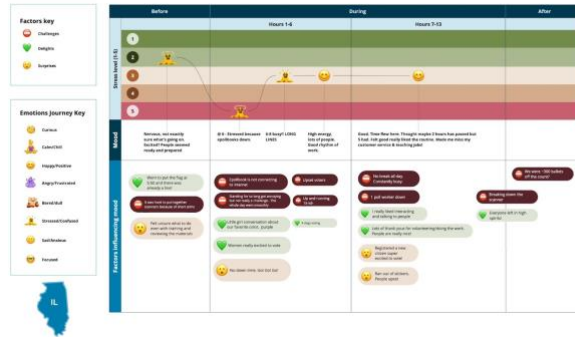


Researcher 11, Check-in Officer

[View full map here](#)

## Illinois

Researcher 4, Election Judge - Illinois



### Researcher 4, Election Judge

[View full map here](#)

## Maryland

Researcher 8, Election Judge - Maryland



### Researcher 8, Election Judge

[View full map here](#)

## Missouri

Researcher 9, Ballot Judge - Missouri



### Researcher 9, Ballot Judge

[View full map here](#)

## New York

Researcher 1, Scanner Inspector - New York



### Researcher 1, Scanner Inspector

[View full map here](#)

Researcher 2, Inspector - New York



### Researcher 2, Inspector

[View full map here](#)

Researcher 7, Scanner Inspector - New York



### Researcher 7, Scanner Inspector

[View full map here](#)