Viewpoint: Reform Before, During, and After
Growing Cadre of Election Reform Scholars Work to Improve Election Administration from Start to Finish

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Topics covered: Early Voting; Poll Worker Training; Ballot Design; ID Requirements; Polling Place Location; Election Day Registration; Provisional Balloting; Public Opinion; Refining Data Collection; Recounts; Ranking the States; Current Statutes

Introduction

There has never been a golden age of American elections. Much as it might be tempting to frame present circumstances as a departure from a less troubled past, such a characterization reflects a certain hubris of the present. From the rampant intimidation, suppression, and ballot box stuff of the nineteenth century to the significant posthumous turnout in election of 1960, American elections are familiar with fraud, negligence, and controversy.[1]

Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say that election administration is as much in need of pragmatism, level headedness, and diligence as it has ever been. Recent debates over the reliability of new technology and the motives behind identification requirements are symptomatic of shaken trust in the ability of government to carry out elections fairly. And a presidential election in which control of the executive branch hung on angrily contested election disputes in Florida reminds us of the shaken confidence and scathing vitriol that failures can provoke.

Given the long history of political elections – one can trace their history back to ancient Greece, after all – it is startling how elusive perfection has proven to be. Elections are still beleaguered by uncertainty about such fundamental questions as how to most clearly design a ballot, most efficiently locate a polling place, and prevent the tampering of votes after they are cast.

Fortunately, a dedicated--and growing--cadre of experts is working to illuminate the many areas that remain obscured. These researchers answer the call of a public that demands expeditious reform, but is not necessarily cognizant of the enormous cost, logistical hurdles, and disagreement over best practices.

One purpose of the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project is to consolidate information about the research being conducted on election reform in an easily-accessible format. Such consolidation has the dual purpose of facilitating communication and cooperation among scholars and also placing the research community in touch with policymakers who get to make the decisions.

Below is a summary of several significant projects, currently under way, that strive to improve election administration from start to finish. While not intended to be a comprehensive review of all the research being conducted, it provides a good sense of both the direction of the field and the cooperative
opportunities that may exist.

**Before the Election**

Many of the opportunities for both excellence and negligence come in the weeks and months preceding an election, far before the public turns a scrutinizing eye to the subject of election administration. The training of poll workers, the design of the ballot, and the implementation of early voting, for instance, will all have been set in stone.

» **Early Voting** - Paul Gronke is the director of the Early Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed College. The EVIC studies early voting trends both in the United States and abroad. Early voting and its effects are of rapidly rising importance as it has steadily gained in popularity throughout the country. Well over one third of voters in such states as California, Texas, Oregon, and others now routinely vote before Election Day. Nevertheless, serious questions remain about the susceptibility of absentee and early voting to fraud and intimidation. The EVIC is poised to be a useful resource for tracking these trends.

» **Poll Worker Training** - Elected officials would like to believe that they have the last word when it comes to the implementation of policies that have, at least ostensibly, been deliberated at length. But perfect implementation is not always the case. Anecdotal evidence suggests that poll workers often allow themselves an alarming degree of latitude in interpreting the law, such as asking for ID when none is technically required and vice versa. **Other evidence** suggests that Blacks and Hispanics are asked for identification more frequently than Whites. The Election Administration Research Center at UC-Berkeley is conducting a comprehensive study of poll workers and polling places. Based on polling place visits and extensive interviews with administrative staff, the EARC plans to compile general recommendations for poll worker training. Finally, the Election Assistance Commission’s draft of a poll worker manual is currently under review, as are a set of guidelines for recruiting poll workers from colleges.

» **Ballot Design** - For all the media attention paid to securing election technology, one need look no further than the 2000 Florida butterfly ballot to see that more fundamental aspects of elections can have great tangible impact. Recent experiments have shown that a poorly designed ballot can have a devastating effect on an election. A startlingly high percentage of voters are unable to fully complete a ballot in accordance with written instructions. Several scholars are working to identify the design characteristics that make ballots most intuitive and user-friendly. Martha Kropf and David Kimball are conducting a content analysis of actual ballots used throughout the country, an expansion of previously published research. The Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland, meanwhile, continues to conduct frequent laboratory experiments testing the usability of various designs, on both paper computers. Paul Herrnson, Richard Niemi, and Michael Hanmer are also studying voter verification systems, attempting to discover which systems best capture voters’ intentions. Their new book, *Voting Technology: The Not-so-simple Act of Casting a Ballot*, will be released in July.

**On Election Day**

A plan is only as good as its implementation. Despite dramatic increases in the frequency of early and absentee voting, Election Day remains the time when public scrutiny turns most unforgivingly to election administration. Research on Election Day procedures reflect the recent prominence of policies that may affect the level of turnout among different groups, such as voter identification requirements and Election Day registration.

» **ID Requirements** - To be sure, the most rancorous sector of election research at present deals with the effects of voter ID requirements. Advocates claim the presentation of identification at polling places is
necessary to prevent fraud while skeptics fear that such requirements are an unnecessary burden likely to deter poor and minority voters. In a recent, admittedly inconclusive study, Timothy Vercellotti and David Andersen find some evidence (PDF) of a negative effect of ID requirements on turnout, especially among minorities. Meanwhile, separate statistical analyses from Jon Katz and Jason Mycoff, et. al., are forthcoming. Tova Wang and Job Serebrov prepared a much-scrutinized report for the Election Assistance Commission that set off a controversy over censorship issues, as the report (PDF) released by the EAC differed substantively from the original draft (PDF). More research in this vein is sure to materialize in the coming months.

» Polling Place Location - A number of scholars have turned their attention to the important subject of polling place location. In a research area likely to be expanded, James Gimpel, Joshua Dyck, and Daron Shaw find (PDF) that the location of polling places, combined with incidental time pressures, can affect the volume of absentee and early voting.[6] Meanwhile, Robert Stein and Greg Vonnahme have recently presented about possible increases in administrative efficiency and turnout resulting from the creation of Election Day vote centers.[7]

» Election Day Registration - Michael Hanmer continues to expand on a body of literature examining the effects of Election Day registration. Using an innovative statistical method – the non-parametric Bounds approach – Hanmer casts doubt on several of the standing assumptions regarding what demographic groups are most likely to be effected by Election Day registration.[8] Michael McDonald continues research on the effect of registration deadlines on turnout as well.

» Provisional Balloting - Timothy Vercellotti delves into what may be the least scrutinized provision of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), the requirement that states provide voters who do not appear on registration lists with provisional ballots. Vercellotti conducted a national telephone survey of 400 election administrators. A paper presented at 2007 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association finds that jurisdictions that recently adopted provisional balloting as a result of the HAVA provisions had low opinions of provisional balloting practices.[9]

After the Election

Equally important to election administration as any other step, the process of earnestly reviewing the successes and failure of every past effort are crucial to a continually improving process. Unfortunately, scholars studying election reform are often forced to work with an alarming paucity of data. The diffuse nature of American election administration, whereby crucial decisions regarding the conduct of elections are often made at the state, county, or even municipal level, makes uniform data very hard to come by.[10] It is for this reason that many scholars have focused their energy on the first-step problem of gathering reliable information.

» Surveys - In 2006, thirty leading research institutions pooled their resources to conduct a landmark survey studying U.S. elections. The Cooperative Congressional Election Study, which includes 30,000 respondents from throughout the country, is comprised of two components. Half of the questionnaire is devoted to common content, asked of all respondents, that focuses on the 2006 Midterm Election. The other half of the questionnaire is modular, with each participating institution providing its own slate of questions, asked of 1,000 participants each. The modules from MIT and Caltech are especially pertinent to election administration. Data are available to the participating institutions immediately and will be made available to the public in early 2008. In addition, the Congressional Research Service is conducting a survey of election officials to collect much needed data on the training of poll workers, database procedures, provisional balloting practices, paper trails, voter ID laws, and the implementation of the Help America Vote Act.
» **Public Opinion** - Thad Hall, David Magleby, Quin Monson, and Kelly Patterson continue to survey voters to gauge confidence in elections. They are conducting exit polls to study the effect of poll worker training, attitude, demographics, and other variables on voter confidence and satisfaction.

» **Refining Data Collection** - Paul Gronke of the Early Voting Information Center continues to make recommendations to improve the Election Assistance Commission’s Election Day Survey. Gronke hopes to improve the uniformity of responses and the make the survey data more usable to scholars and the general public.

» **Recounts** - Edward Foley and Steven Huefner of Election Law @ Moritz have embarked on a foundation-supported project to analyze the laws throughout the United States for resolving disputed elections. Examining both recounts and contested elections, this book-length study will endeavor to make policy recommendations on reforms to minimize the scope of conflict and to expedite resolution of these disputes.

» **Ranking the States** - Heather Gerken, in association with colleagues at the Moritz College of Law, Pew Charitable Trusts, and the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project, is working to develop a so-called “Democracy Index.” The index, inspired by the US News and World Report college rankings, would seek to rank election administration in the fifty states using objective criteria, in the hopes of embarrassing the worst-performing states into reform. Although the nature of such an index remains unclear, the proposal has gained at least some legislative traction and national attention, with a bill (PDF) introduced by Senator Barack Obama.

» **Current Statutes** - Doug Chapin and his colleagues at electionline.org continue to maintain the most comprehensive resource for election-related news, statutes, and pending legislation. The website serves as an invaluable tool for easy access to hard-to-find election information.

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**Viewpoint** is an occasional feature in which members of the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project staff analyze various election reform issues.

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[3] See the large collection of research available through the [Center for American Politics and Citizenship](https://www.capc.org).


[10] Thad Hall and Daniel Tokaji have recently reflected on a possible long-term solution to this dilemma. See "Money for Data: Funding the Oldest Unfunded Mandate," *Election Law @ Moritz*, June 2007.

Original Source:

http://www.electionreformproject.org/Resources/520d7636-3c40-490d-9053-46a72340f04b/r1/Detail.aspx#earlyvoting