

# Social Workers as Poll Workers: Experiences in the 2020 and 2021 Elections

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**Abstract:** As social workers committed to political justice and called to political action, we reflect on our own experiences as poll workers in the 2020 and 2021 elections. We encourage social workers at all levels to understand the process and consider action as poll workers. In discussing our personal journeys to becoming a poll worker, training, and working on Election Day, we reflect on the challenges and benefits to us as individuals. We discuss the connection between poll working and social work as well as benefits to our system by the involvement of social workers in election administration. We end with a call to action for others to participate in poll work as well as the need for relevant research.

**Keywords:** political social work, elections administration, community action

Administering elections has changed dramatically in recent years. Persily and Stewart (2021) describe the 2020 election as a miracle that officials and poll workers were able to successfully administer a safe, secure election in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, poll worker shortages, unprecedented use of mail balloting amid postal service slowdowns, election disinformation, last minute changes in laws, partisan mistrust, and record turnout; a tragedy in that the election was branded as “rigged” or “stolen” and led to the insurrection of January 6, 2021.

As social workers who believe in *political justice*, the ideal that all members of society have equal access to voting rights, voting processes, and political opportunities (Pritzker & Lozano, 2021), we reflect on our own experiences as poll workers and our roles in implementing elections in a contentious climate. We believe political justice is a key component of social justice, and that social workers have a vested interest in elections that are designed and implemented in a free and fair manner. We hope our experiences in 2020 and 2021 encourage other social workers to serve as poll workers, educate clients and communities about voting, and advocate for elections with more political justice.

## Context

*Elections administration* refers to processes by which voter names are gathered into a list and votes are cast and counted, including when, where, and how people register and vote (James, 2011, p. 220). Political injustice has a long history in election administration. Practices like poll taxes and literacy tests were used overtly by elections administrators post-Civil War until the 1960s (Ellis, 2008) to “severely depress African American participation and thereby maintain white political dominance” (Cain & Zhang, 2016, p. 891).

Elections administration affects access to the vote, voter confidence, participation, perceptions of voter fraud, and can affect the outcomes of elections (Burden & Neiheisel, 2013; James,

2011). Processes that make voting harder can lower the numbers of people who successfully cast their ballots, and therefore change the election results, moving power from one political party to another and undermining the democratic process (James, 2011). We are conscious of the ways interactions with poll workers and other elections administrators can affect whether voters feel respected, comfortable, or welcome at the polls, and that negative experiences can decrease the likelihood that voters will return.

Elections in the United States are generally administered by partisan, sometimes elected, officials (Cain & Zhang, 2016), differing from elections in other countries with neutral civil servants. The Supreme Court in *Shelby v. Holder* (2013) loosened requirements for elections administrators to notify the Department of Justice of administrative changes, meaning significant changes in polling places or procedures may go unnoticed or not be reported until after the election (Cain & Zhang, 2016).

### **Importance of Poll Workers**

The role of poll workers and elections administrators is crucial. Voters' perceptions of poll workers connect to their sense of the fairness and reliability of electoral processes (Burden et al., 2017). Poll workers in nearly every jurisdiction open up polling places, check in voters, issue ballots to voters, and close polling places. Poll workers may also assist with voting equipment, supervise workers, greet voters, manage lines, and serve as troubleshooters (Burden & Milyo, 2015). The responsibilities of poll workers vary depending on the state's laws related to voting, the significant discretion that is given to election officials to administer elections in their precinct or municipality (Atkeson et al., 2014), and implementation of technology (Burden, et al. 2017). Although this is not reflected in the literature, it is the authors' experience that the variation in poll worker duties may also have some connection to municipal resources, as polling sites with more resources may have more staff and bandwidth to serve voters.

As elections have gotten more complex, poll worker tasks may also include conducting Election Day Registration and counting absentee ballots in addition to checking voter names against the rolls, answering voter questions, making sure technology is used correctly, and assisting voters who need accommodations. Poll workers may decide which voters are eligible to vote by enforcing laws related to voter identification or other requirements (Atkeson et al., 2014). Theoretically, poll workers educate and encourage voters with disabilities or language barriers about accommodations. Poll workers may determine voter intent for write-in or absentee ballots or participate in recounts or audits. Finally, poll workers interact with campaigns, candidates, and political party members in various ways, enforcing rules about campaign-related materials, distance of political signs and supporters from polls, and interacting with poll watchers (Atkeson et al., 2014). During COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021, poll workers in many states were responsible for educating voters about rules related to safety mandates (c.f. Leidman et al., 2020).

## **Reflections**

To describe our experiences serving as poll workers in 2020 and 2021, we have contributed our own narratives about the process. We came together to write this as a group based on the initiative of one author, who rallied colleagues who were known to have worked the polls in the 2020 election. A subgroup developed a vision for the article and sent out guiding questions: Why and how did you sign up to become a poll worker? What training did you receive? What was election day like? How was the election different from previous years? What do you see as the benefits of being a poll worker? What do you think social workers bring to the experience of poll working? Each contributor was asked to respond to these questions in a shared document. Contributors were asked to answer as many questions as were relevant to them, given their experiences and the structure of elections in their locality.

As a group, we served in suburban and urban areas, in districts that ranged from primarily voters of color to primarily white, in both primary and general elections. We are all from two neighboring Northeast states. Our personal positionality includes three women of color, four white women, and one white agender person. All are social work faculty, PhD students, or recent MSWs.

A subgroup coded the responses into themes. We divided our experience of social workers at the polls into three distinct steps: 1) deciding to become a poll worker and the application process, 2) training prior to Election Day, and 3) working on Election Day. Representative reflections from each theme were then selected for inclusion in the manuscript by subgroup members and confirmed with the group as being representative of authors' experiences. In this article, we also discuss specific challenges of COVID-19, rewards of working the polls, the connection between social work and poll working, and the benefits of social workers being poll workers, then end with a call to action.

### **Step 1: Decision and Application**

Joyce, then a PhD student and faculty member, decided to work the polls and described the steps in applying to become a poll worker. She had taken a required PhD policy course that highlighted policy's connection to social justice. As Joyce describes:

We discussed issues such as immigration status related to the Census and felony conviction laws regarding voting. We educated fellow students and faculty and, through them, the community. It was rewarding, kept my adrenaline high, and gave me a sense of satisfaction during a very stagnated time for our profession's normal practices. When our last sessions were over, I felt a need to do more. The local elections were coming up. I reached out to the Board of Elections about working the polls and heard nothing. I thought maybe they had too many volunteers but was encouraged by a professor to follow up. This second time I called, I received an extremely high-spirited, jovial supervisor on the phone. She thanked me very warmly, and assured me that my services were needed and that

she would personally contact me with the next steps. Before I knew it, I was called with my identification number and a date for training.

A social work faculty member in a suburban area who had been a leader in encouraging students to become engaged in the process, Lucinda, decided in 2020 that she needed to work the polls. She says:

Election Day 2020 was my first time serving as a poll worker. Despite teaching my students about the importance of being politically and civically engaged, organizing campus-wide voter registration events, and spearheading statewide Legislative Education and Advocacy Day activities, it wasn't until this particular election that I felt an ethical obligation to sign up with a sense of urgency. I felt our democracy was at stake, and in some strange way, if it had been challenged, I would be somewhat responsible for "doing nothing." As a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization that has a commitment to social action and service, the call for their over 300,000 initiated members to serve in this capacity was the clarion call that sealed the deal. So, I applied—with less than six weeks left before Election Day. To my disappointment, I was placed on the standby list. My county had received many applications, but I was told to go through the training "just in case." I took basic notes during the training, and set my alarm for 6:00 a.m. in the event that I would be the lucky winner. Around 6:45am I got the call that not only was I to report to a select site, but that I would be a *chairperson!* I hadn't been trained for such an important role, and I was certainly nervous having such an immense responsibility, but in true social worker form, I arrived at my polling site, rolled up my sleeves, and tackled the challenge ahead.

A social worker and faculty member in a suburban area was motivated for different reasons. As a parent, she became aware that the local elementary school, which is a poll site, was under consideration of no longer being used because of "safety concerns." Chrisann relates:

Hearing about this change in polling places made me realize how important it is for voting locations to be in close proximity to communities and easy to identify. I hadn't stopped to consider that local community spaces like senior centers could refuse to be polling stations, or that voting in churches may make some people uncomfortable. Schools seem like a neutral and trusted location. However, concerns that just anyone could walk into schools on voting days, particularly if school is in session those days, became a controversy in my town. I was dismayed how the issue was being discussed within the local community. The issue of voting rights being restored to people with felony convictions was used as a scare tactic to convince people that schools could become places where "dangerous" people gathered. This was disappointing, and made me interested in learning more about the local Board of Elections and how decisions about polling stations were made. I wondered who holds the power.

While these three were motivated in different ways and by different topics, they all decided to take the time to apply, prepare, take a day off of work, and move forward in the process. The next step for all our authors and all poll workers (particularly first-time poll workers) is training.

## **Step 2: Training and Preparing**

The process of preparing to be a poll worker varies drastically from one area to another. Training is mandated in most states, and generally relatively short, but can be done in many different forms and may require a knowledge test. The stories provided below are from social workers who worked the same election in jurisdictions less than 80 miles from each other, with very different experiences.

Joyce: The training was very rigorous and detailed, and there was an exam at the end. It was challenging because we were still expected to maintain our adherence to the COVID-19 restrictions. The entire time I kept thinking “I am an educated woman, but there is no way I will pass this test at the end.” The instructors were very patient and knowledgeable and were experienced at working in the voting sites. They ensured that we were informed of what we needed to know and who to go to when in doubt.

Chrisann: I was surprised that the training was done by the local Democratic party. It was a mix of live guidance and video messages. It was great to practice working with the technology we would use on Election Day and see a voting machine. They explained the many ways voter registration could be looked up in the system and how to guide voters (via a text message) to the correct polling station if they were at the wrong place. I am not sure the training was thorough enough for the “chairs” of each section, though. For example, we were told about poll watching but when a poll watcher came to our polling station halfway through the day and asked us to track how many registered Democrats came to vote, I really didn’t think they were allowed to make this request and I refused to track this. Later on, the chair of the site said this was OK after she checked the ID of the person and their letter of permission.

Joanne, a social work faculty member who lives in the next county over from Chrisann, got no training at all.

Joanne: This was my first time as a poll worker and since I had not had the opportunity to attend any of the training sessions offered by my election board, I was somewhat anxious as the day began. I really had no idea what I would be doing but I had been assured that there would be people there who would give us all instruction.

Joanne also prepared by casting her ballot early, so she could focus on her assigned duties on Election Day. This was a substantial time commitment that took more than three hours to drive and wait in line for prior to Election Day.

Melissa, a then-MSW student in a small town who has been a poll worker before, prepared in other ways.

Prior to Election Day, I constantly paid attention to actions by the Executive Branch via media technology and my town election personnel to keep track of changing guidelines. I also felt it my professional and personal responsibility to educate the public of my town via social media on updated procedures such as location of the ballot box, hours of town hall operation, and guidelines for mailing in the ballot.

### **Step 3: Election Day**

The amount of political and COVID-19–related tension leading up to Election Day 2020 left some poll workers expecting the worst. The challenges needed to conduct safe elections, concerns about election fraud, and racial tension provided a sense of preparing for the unexpected on Election Day that marked the 2020 election as different. Those working the 2021 primary elections had the added knowledge of the false claims about 2020 election fraud and the consequences of those claims during the January insurrection, adding additional stress.

Lusta, a social work PhD student who worked in an urban area, describes the contrast between the expectations and her experiences:

Election Day 2020 was completely unlike what I had expected. Given the contentious sociopolitical climate and the fact that the world was still struggling from the effects of a pandemic, I expected tensions to be high. Instead, people were pleasant and in very high spirits. The lines got very long, even circling the block at certain times. Yet, everyone remained calm and orderly. There was not a single altercation that I witnessed, and no displays of anger or aggression, not once in nearly 16 hours.

I was stationed at the entrance to a large room. I greeted each voter, ensured that masks were worn properly, and managed the flow of voters to ensure that social distancing was maintained and overcrowding minimized. I thanked each voter for their patience and for voting before directing them to the appropriate check-in table. In nearly every instance, upon exiting after voting, they would seek me out to thank me for my service.

Many voters had never voted before, both older adults and young recently eligible people. Whether voting for the first time or had voted in every election for decades, everyone carried the same air of intensity and hope. Several voters commented about witnessing and contributing to history. Some were afraid of what would happen if they were too complacent to show up. They came in droves, many displaying intergenerational representation, from newborns to great-grandparents. I stood there hour after hour with pride, happy to be doing my part.

Chrisann notes a lack of partisan discord among her co-election workers:

Overall, I enjoyed working together as a Democrat with my Republican colleagues on our team of four. We had a lot of time to talk and get to know each other. It was like being on a long road trip together where by the end people are showing wedding photos, asking each other for jobs, and having political discussions.

Melissa comments on the tense environment at her polling place, a difference from previous years:

Tension seems to be an ever-present force, and I believe this is a welcome and necessary part of public discourse. In previous years, there seemed to have not been an expectation of potential violence. In 2020, my polling place, for the first time in my memory, had a police presence. Their presence seemed to not cause any additional stress for the public. My polling place trained me to escape in an emergency and how to perform de-escalation if members of the public were upset. I utilized my knowledge of de-escalation tools from coursework and field experience to support their training for other poll workers who do not have such background. De-escalation skills that were key in keeping the venue orderly and calm included active and reflective listening, approaching voters with a calm and nonjudgmental stance, using open-ended questions, providing undivided attention, and expressing empathy. Physically, I was required to remain behind a see-through barrier wearing my mask while giving instructions for how to fill out a ballot. This caused many issues, especially with voters who were elderly or hard-of-hearing.

Joyce, working in the New York City primary elections in 2021, experienced a range of duties and emotions.

I was assigned to the polling site in my neighborhood where I usually vote from 5:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. For me the experience was humbling, exciting, and rewarding all at the same time: humbling because I am normally in an authoritative position, first as a long-time manager for a large municipal agency and now as a social work faculty member; exciting because it was all new, and I felt like I was giving back to my community; rewarding because I met new people, both other poll workers and voters. Over the previous year of isolation, I had forgotten how friendly and talkative people could be, as well as how opinionated they could be about candidates and the new process for voting in New York.

There were all kinds of personalities that I encountered that day, but the best were all of the voters who took the time to thank us for our volunteerism. The two highlights of the experience were being recognized for the choice to be involved and helping the many people who were very confused about the process.

Francis described the difference between their experiences in 2018 and 2020.

My experience in November 2020 as an Assistant Registrar was inspiring. The build-up to the general election throughout the prior year was incredible and I hoped for more voter turnout than I had previously seen. I started as a “floating” poll worker in 2018’s general election at my hometown’s Election Day Registration (EDR) venue. My first time, less than 80 people registered and voted throughout the entire day. In 2020, I arrived at 5:00 a.m. in order to set up the venue, be sworn in, and prepare for my responsibilities as an Assistant Registrar alongside my team. We were an uncertain dozen, equipped with extra personal protective equipment and several pandemic protocols, freshly approved by the registrar’s office that morning. By 6:30 a.m., we had already helped 10 people register and vote! My venue had a steady flow of people throughout the day and shattered our record for voter turnout. Most people came to EDR because they recently decided to vote, just came of age, or newly moved to town.

Unfortunately, some were already registered and wrongly assumed that they could vote at the EDR venue as a default. This election was highly emotional, and voters felt that the stakes were high. They always are, but this time the slightest barrier between them and casting their vote seemed insurmountable. It was rewarding to help people navigate the system and overcome barriers. I enjoyed working at the EDR because we guided people through the entire process of registration and voting. De-escalation skills were key in keeping the venue orderly and calm. Approaching everyone with empathy and compassion gave voters hope and reassurance that they were not alone. Not all poll workers are prepared to advocate for someone and fight for someone’s right to vote—that is the social worker in me.

Jurisdictions vary about whether poll workers must work the entire day or a partial shift. Chrisann noted that her day was long due to state requirements require poll workers to start at 6:00 a.m. and end close to 10:00 p.m. Melissa and Joanne also noted the challenges of a long day working the polls. Melissa needed to count the unusually large numbers of absentee ballots during the 2020 election.

Melissa: A great majority of my town voted by mail, increasing the need for ballot counters past any other election in my memory. Due to the high influx of such ballots, I was required to participate in counting the ballots to support my colleagues assigned that duty. I was able to take a 45- to 60-minute break during my shift that started at 5:00 a.m. and ended at 10:00 p.m. after all ballots were counted, reported, and the area cleaned up.

Joanne: I got up in the dark, had my coffee, packed some food, and headed to my local high school by 5:00 a.m. I was not surprised to see several other poll workers waiting to be let in, but I was surprised to see a line of voters already. This added to the sense of excitement of the day, the feeling that this was very important. I wondered what motivated people to line up so early (what “side” were they on?),

given that I live in a very politically conservative community and one that has been experiencing quite a bit of conflict and division. I hoped the day would be calm and orderly and that nothing bad would happen (arguments, etc.).

The day was exciting and exhausting. We were required to commit to a 17-hour workday and were busy throughout the entire day. I identified myself to the supervisor as a registered Democrat, so I was paired with a Republican worker at one of several registration tables. I signed voters in as they arrived and instructed them where and how to cast their vote. Once the door was open to voters at 6:00 a.m. we had a constant and steady flow of voters. I got a momentary break and checked the time for the first time that day: It was almost noon! More than one voter expressed displeasure that they weren't required to show any identification in our state, but for the most part voters were cooperative and respectful. It was encouraging to see how many new voters there were, including many friends of my children, which was great. There was a sense of being part of something bigger than just ourselves. People were motivated and excited and there seemed to be a real sense of involvement that I'd never seen or felt before.

We had a moment of excitement when one of our community members who is a fairly well-known actor came to our table to sign in. The moment added a little something to our day! We all just kept moving ahead, signing in voter after voter for hours. The site supervisor was really amazing at organizing everyone, answering every question anyone had, and working steadily throughout the day.

Lucinda noticed her identity affected the ways in which voters interacted with her.

Some moments were busier than others. Being placed in a community with a large Jewish population, I was cognizant about the fact that I was one of the few Black poll workers or voters at the site. Some made outward remarks regarding who they planned to vote for and who they hoped would win. The second worker assigned to my station, representing the opposing party, was an undergraduate student who grew up in that community. He greeted everyone who walked in as they all seemed to know him from temple or school.

After personally casting my ballot during early voting, I was shocked that so many still needed to vote. Some were at the wrong polling station. Others didn't even know if they were registered. I was disappointed and wondered how many others were in similar situations.

Lucinda was not alone in her concerns about voters successfully and knowledgeably navigating the process.

Chrisann: One issue that came up was people not filling in the ballot correctly. This means we had to spoil the ballot, put it in a special spoiled ballot bag, record the numbers/incidents, and then provide a fresh ballot. I was told that a voter can

receive up to three ballots if two are spoiled. I did feel bad when one middle-aged man messed up his ballot because he forgot to wear his glasses. The polling site chair actually chastised him about that.

Shannon, a social work faculty member who was a poll worker in a small town and has worked the polls before, notes that rules were different in her town:

Under our state's election laws, voters are allowed to ask for as many new ballots as they would like. They only had to ask one of the poll workers for a new ballot, return the old one, and then fill out the new ballot. Usually people only need one new ballot, although the most I've ever seen was a woman who was very confused and needed eight or nine before she was successful. If voters get frustrated with this process or something goes wrong and the machine can't count the ballot, that vote will be counted by hand, with a poll worker determining the intent of the voter to the best of their ability. I always pray that doesn't happen, because I hate to be responsible for guessing a voter's intent. It reminds me of watching the recount of the 2000 Bush vs. Gore election in Florida, with multiple poll workers holding up the (in)famous butterfly ballots with "hanging chads" and trying to guess what the voter wanted.

### ***Closing the Polls***

Both Lucinda and Joanne experienced a lot of emotions around the end of Election Day.

Lucinda: After the last voter cast their ballot exactly at closing time, we began the closing process. I was nervous. Perhaps it felt more intense than it should have. But witnessing the breakdown process made me appreciate our election process in a different way. It also made me question the lack of technological advancement that seemed to make the process a lot more complex than it needed to be. We locked up; we placed printouts, and keys, and zip ties, and signed forms in their respective colored bags; and I walked to my car. Admittedly, nervousness struck again as I began to drive this precious cargo to the local police precinct. Perhaps I've watched too many episodes of *Scandal*, but the idea of being personally responsible for getting all of the votes from my polling place appropriately accounted for suddenly felt overwhelming. As dramatic as it sounds, I locked my doors, frequently glanced at my rearview mirror, and drove cautiously to the police station. The drop-off felt just as cinematic, full with armed guards and a seamless assembly line where cars pulled up, windows rolled down, colored bags were handed over, and goodnights were said.

Joanne: Once the polls closed, we had another hour of helping to close out the machines, make sure every ballot was accounted for, etc. The level of care that went into that process was painstaking. Although I never questioned the integrity of the voting process, witnessing and participating in this process made me realize

how many checks and balances exist to secure the voting process in this country. At the end of the day I was tired, achy, and hungry ... but felt great!

### **Pollworking During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The elections of 2020 and 2021 were affected significantly by the specter of COVID-19, the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, and the overall political climate.

Chrisann: I was a bit worried about catching COVID as a poll worker on Election Day. However, only one voter refused to wear a mask. In the moment, I forgot that the chair said that she would make the person wait outside until everyone who was in the polling station had completed voting and then that person could enter and vote. In general, I don't think this is a great solution for the poll workers. My response was to tell this man that he had to wear a mask, he told me that there was not a sign, and I sternly repeated that he had to wear a mask. Eventually he put on his mask and voted, and nothing was amiss.

Shannon: We were prepared for conflict over masks, and there was a lot of anxiety in the polling location as we waited for potential arguments. I only remember one individual who wanted to "protest." He showed up with a paper towel over his mouth tied on by string. We moved him through the process quickly and got him out the door. It wasn't until after the polls closed that night that I realized how tense I had been all day at the potential for arguing with people about masks and safety. A lot of our poll workers are in vulnerable groups and didn't work that election because of COVID-19 fears. I felt a sense of responsibility to protect those who did come to work.

Joyce experienced the first New York City election with a new voting system while still dealing with COVID-19 and the racial justice movement.

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) was welcomed by many who had been advocates for change in electoral systems. These advocates were mostly people who understood the basic process of how voting works in the city. Many voters, though, had a fear of the unknown. RCV was not understood and with many other unknowns during the civil unrest that followed the 2020 Census, the George Floyd murder and the COVID-19 pandemic, and the feeling that New York was the epicenter for these different life or death crises we faced, RCV seemed to be the "straw that broke the camel's back." People did not want to face another "unknown." People did not want to trust another change or adapt to one. Fears and isolation due to the pandemic, resistance to change, and lack of trust for the systems currently in place and conspiracy theories were particularly apparent in the population at my polling place, primarily people of color, who speculated about what the government was going to do with their demographic data. This lack of trust affected people's experiences of voting, replying to the Census, and in general interacting with civic life.

Shannon has worked multiple elections and reflects on the difference in her assignment in 2020 due to COVID-19:

I have counted absentee ballots in multiple elections; it generally takes little time and is paid scant attention. I always find it very stressful because obtaining and casting an absentee ballot in my state is complicated and I worry it will result in disqualified ballots. Voters need to follow a specific procedure to request an absentee ballot, with limited reasons allowed, and sign a scary-sounding legal statement. The process is seen by many as restrictive and intimidating and because of these limits, we generally have few absentee ballots to count on Election Day. However, for the 2020 and 2021 elections, procedures changed because of COVID-19. This change to election procedures was hotly debated, but meant a record number of absentee ballots were received.

I spent Election Day in an old gym with a colleague from the other major political party on a stage in full view of all voters. We opened hundreds of absentee ballots, separating them from the two envelopes they come in and stacking them to be run through tabulator machines. One voter became agitated watching me because she saw me setting aside the empty envelopes and thought I was throwing away ballots.

Although I was inside all day without news, I returned home at the end of the day to footage from across the country showing poll workers in other states—doing exactly what I had done—being heckled, questioned, or otherwise harassed for doing their duty. I was incredibly unsettled. My children have always been proud to say that their mom was an election worker. I wondered if they would still be proud. A few days later, we watched Vice-President-Elect Harris' acceptance speech where she specifically said poll workers and elections officials were owed a debt of gratitude. Both of my daughters turned to me and said, "She's talking to you, Mommy!"

### **Benefits of Pollworking**

The public often views poll workers as volunteers, but this was not the experience of many of our authors, who learned they are commonly (modestly) compensated:

Francis: I was paid \$365 for the entire day, working from 5:00 a.m. until around 10:00pm. It was a long day, and I could have been paid more for working less time at my day job. Personally, I do not work Election Day for the money and did not think of it until my check came in the mail. It felt like a respectable amount for what was asked of me. However, during Election Day, sometimes people thanked me for "volunteering" to work, which felt awkward to me. I once told someone, "Actually, we're paid workers." They were outraged, yelled, and complained to my registrar. Since then, I merely smile and say, "I'm happy to help, have a nice day!"

Joanne: Poll workers in my county get paid minimum wage for their work on Election Day. Our day went from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and I was paid \$227.50 for the day. I didn't know we were going to be paid when I signed up. In fact, I thought we were volunteering. If anything, I may have felt it was more "noble" to do this on a volunteer basis. Wanting to contribute on a larger social scale was an important motivation to my deciding to be a poll worker, especially in the current climate.

Non-monetary benefits were perceived to be far greater, including benefits to roles as parents and faculty members.

Lusta: For me, working the polls on Election Day was an immense sacrifice. I had to take the day off from my job and skip a day of schoolwork that I, as a PhD student with a full-time course load, could not afford to miss. It also meant being away from my children for an entire day when my regular schedule already makes spending quality time with them difficult. However, even with those challenges, the biggest thing I took away from the poll worker experience was a tremendous sense of accomplishment and pride. I remember coming home after that exhausting day and having my eldest daughter, a high school freshman, excitedly report that she had told everyone at school that her mom had served as a poll worker. She then proceeded to hug me before announcing that she too would be a poll worker one day. Even without meaning to or realizing it, I had impressed upon her the importance of civic duty and that, for me, was the icing on the cake.

For social workers, I believe there are numerous benefits to being a poll worker. From a clinical perspective, there is an opportunity to flex interpersonal skills in a different context. This can help you become more flexible as an ethical practitioner and get to know other people in your town. Additionally, I was able to review how efficacious the aids for hearing, vision, and language were based on my observations with the public. This was a great resource to address potential pitfalls in inclusive democratic tools from a technical perspective. Being a poll worker also gives you a chance to learn how your town works. I live by the philosophy that the more you know about your town, the more you can understand the intersection of state guidelines and municipal practices.

Joanne: The two biggest benefits I got from working on Election Day 2020 were having a sense of being part of an event with a large social and historical meaning (that meant the most to me) and learning about the process of voting from a completely new perspective (other than as a voter). This was not only of personal interest to me but enabled me to be a better social work instructor.

Lucinda: When my father became a US citizen after over 30 years of residency, one of his first acts of service was volunteering as a poll worker himself. He took pride in his participation and often reflected on his experiences with us. Throughout Election Day, several voters thanked me for my "service." It wasn't

until after I completed my day that I reflected on how fortunate we are to be a part of such an important process that many of us take for granted. I returned home that evening exhausted, but also extremely gratified.

Secondly, I was excited to share the process with my students. In class, we had been following the election campaigns very closely. They were assigned the responsibility of getting family and friends to register to vote. They thought it was “cool” that I had signed up to be a poll worker. I was glad that I was able to live up to the hype as I shared my stories about Election Day with them the day after the election. A number of students signed up to be poll workers themselves after my encouragement. They learned that as educators, we don’t just talk the talk—we walk the walk—in heels—well! My participation has given me new content to include in my classes, new ideas for class assignments, and new motivation to encourage our next generation of social work professionals to become politically engaged.

### **Connections: Social Work and Pollworking**

The poll workers represented among the authors felt strongly about the connections between social work and pollworking, as well as the benefits to the voting process that come with social workers serving as poll workers. Joanne reflected that she wasn’t thinking of herself as a social worker on Election Day, but felt she brought an understanding of the larger context of voting and systems to Election Day. Here are a few examples of other benefits:

Francis: Not everyone considers voting a human right. As a poll worker, I have witnessed some reasons my community chooses to vote: responsibility, fear, anger, celebration, and as a form of protest. It was necessary and fulfilling. It was social work.

Chrisann: Training for poll workers is very nuts and bolts without a lot of focus on how to interact with people around diverse needs. Social workers can address different language needs or issues around access challenges, like low vision or other disabilities, that are not being met so sensitively.

Melissa: Social workers bring an enormous impact to poll working based on our person-centered skillsets, trained patience, and observation skills. Social workers bring an air of cooperation and motivation when Election Day gets tedious and potentially draining. Overall, social workers bring intersecting interpersonal and public process skills that can assist the proficiency of Election Day.

Joyce: I didn’t plan to reveal my professional experience to my fellow poll workers, but I quickly saw my supervisory and leadership skills coming out. One minute I was handing out fliers and greeting people as they came into the site. The next minute I was taking addresses and ensuring that the lines were moving quickly because people were becoming frustrated. I dealt with angry and hostile

voters who were at the wrong poll site and encouraged them with plans of action to reduce the intensity of the conflicts. I decided to take shorter breaks because I realized my coordinator was overwhelmed and needed help while others insisted on taking their entire breaks. I stayed until the last work was done that evening, even though she offered to let me go home because she said I worked very hard.

Lucinda: I believe being a social worker made me well suited for my role as a poll worker and chairperson. We are known to be adaptable to new environments, never shying away from a challenge. My ethical foundation directed how I approached my tasks—even as some felt like they were only there for the paycheck. I truly felt a sense of duty to ensure the process was conducted efficiently. As voters, especially those who were first-timers, entered our site, I empathized with their confusion and took time to walk them through the process and assisted them with the ballot machines. Lastly, as our Code of Ethics calls for us to “engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021, 6.04(a)), my role as a social worker was justified as not just one seeking to make some extra cash on my “day off” but rather as a respected and professionally trained change agent for such a time as this.

The quotations above exemplify the many connections between poll working, social work skills and knowledge at the micro, mezzo and macro level. Social workers are trained to think in a person-centered way, and to be adaptable, patient, observant, and proficient at managing conflict—all important interpersonal skills when interacting with voters and voting systems. The supervisory and leadership skills mentioned above are natural complements to navigating poll worker teams and election sites.

### **Call to Action**

This article is the first in the social work literature to discuss the engagement of social workers in the process of election administration; it also occurs amid national calls for increased citizen involvement in election administration and calls by leadership within the social work profession for the same from social workers. Given this lack of existing literature, there is a need for substantive qualitative and quantitative research around the engagement of social workers in the process of elections administration, including as poll workers and other elections administrators. We do not currently know how many social workers are serving in roles within elections administration. Katie Hobbs, the Arizona Secretary of State during the 2020 elections and the current Governor of Arizona, is a trained social worker who brought her social work experience to elections administration (State of Arizona, n.d.). Social workers in elected positions can work to change election administration rules. For example, Cristin McCarthy Vahey is a social worker who serves on the Government Administration and Elections Committee within the Connecticut state legislature (Connecticut House Democrats, n.d.). She helps to define voting laws for the state of Connecticut, including elections administration. Additionally, social workers can

advocate for changes to election administration and other related laws as part of their duty to political action. Alesandra Lozano is a social worker who led the work of Common Cause California on voter protection, voting rights legislation, election administration, and redistricting (*Alesandra Lozano bio*, n.d.).

The experiences described here are a small segment of the experience of poll workers. A particular limitation is that our experiences are in two neighboring northeast states and represent only the political climate in these states.

In addition to future research, we encourage all social workers to consider pollworking at least once to help deepen their understanding of the political process and its implementation in their community. Professional organizations such as NASW can support this by reaching out to members and encouraging them to work the polls. In addition, advocates can ask state licensure boards to provide continuing education credits for social workers who serve as poll workers, following the example of Ohio during the 2022 election (NASW Ohio Chapter, 2022). Schools of social work can enable students to serve as poll workers by offering practicum hours, course credit or extra credit, or canceling classes on Election Day. More information about working the polls can be found by visiting the US Election Assistance Commission website (<https://www.eac.gov/help-america-vote>) or by contacting your local elections official. Working the polls is one way that social workers can engage with their communities and help make political justice more of a reality.

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