

Learning Module: How Elections Are Run

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Election administration plays a central role in ensuring the legitimacy of the electoral process and outcomes. Subverting faith and trust in elections undermines the foundations of democracy. Research has shown that technical improvements to electoral administration can improve voter perceptions of elections being fair, but that there are limits to what election administration reforms alone can achieve ([Bowler et. al 2015](#)). As we prepare for the 2024 elections and increasingly contested elections and election outcomes, one approach to addressing perceptions of legitimacy and trust is to incorporate election administration into civic learning curriculum and campus-wide initiatives. Furthermore, engaging young people in election administration can serve as an opportunity for developing civic agency and promoting increased informed participation in elections.

Learning Objectives:

- Develop a better understanding of how the election process works by gaining first-hand experience as a “page” or poll worker in local elections.
- Develop a better understanding of how elections are conducted and how election processes vary by location in the United States through primary and secondary sources.
- Share ideas for improving elections and voting processes.

Who runs elections?

In the United States, elections are usually run at the county level, though in some places they are run by townships and cities. There are more than 10,000 jurisdictions that have primary responsibility for running elections in the country. The administration of elections in the United States is handled by state and local election boards and local supervisors or voter registrars (titles may vary). Some states divide duties between two or more offices. There are more than 8,000 government employees who run elections, in addition to more than 100,000 poll workers.

In-Depth

Examine: [Tables: how election administration varies by state](#)

Read: [The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration](#)

Watch: [Faces of Democracy](#), Issue One

Search: [State Elections Legislation Database](#), National Conference on State Legislatures

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- How might differences across states and localities in how elections are run and who runs elections impact voter experience?
- What role do states and localities play in ensuring free and fair elections?

Election Workers

Election workers are the face of democracy. They help ensure a safe, fair, efficient election for all voters. Poll workers support early voting locations, ensure technology functions, and help minimize delays at polling places on election day. Poll worker shortages can cause long lines and polling location closures, leading to voter disenfranchisement, especially in communities of color and low income communities.

In-Depth

Download: [State Compendium of Election Worker Laws and Statutes](#) (pdf) and read your state's laws for election workers and compare them to those of another state.

Watch: [As threats to elections and election workers continue AZ sec. of state calls for 'accountability'](#)

Read: [The High Cost of Turnover: When local election officials leave their positions in record numbers, the costs to institutional knowledge and running elections are significant](#), Issue One [Securing 2024: Defending US Elections through Investment and Reform](#), Issue One [Election Officials Call on Congress to Pass Anti-Doxxing Measures](#), Issue One [Public Officials Face Surge of Threats Ahead of 2024 Election](#), Time Magazine [Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders](#), Brennan Center

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- How and why do different states have varying laws and requirements for election workers?
- What challenges do election workers face?
- What can be done to support and reform election processes?

[Help America Vote Act of 2002](#) (HAVA)

After weaknesses in local polling practices were highlighted in the 2000 presidential election, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). This legislation provides minimum standards for election administration, requires states to offer provisional ballots to voters whose registration status is in question, and offers federal funds to replace outdated and unreliable voting equipment.

In-Depth

[Read the Help America Vote Act of 2002](#) (pdf)

["The Help America Vote Act: 20 Years Later,"](#) Wendy Underhill, National Conference of State Legislatures, June 1, 2022

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- What election process issues did the Help America Vote Act seek to address?
- What issues still persist?
- How would you amend HAVA to address ongoing issues in election administration?

Disinformation and Distrust: Is there a link?

Political science research has shown that allegations of unfair election practices damage voter confidence in the election process. Most recently, baseless lies about the 2020 election and who won have affected perceptions of election administration and made it difficult to provide voters accurate information.

In-Depth

Read: "[Disinformation poses an unprecedented threat in 2024 — and the U.S. is less ready than ever](#)"

Watch: [Do Americans Trust Their Elections?](#) Pew Research Center

Examine Public Opinion:

- [Public Support for Federal Funding of Elections](#), Citizen Data and Issue One
- Survey of Performance of American Elections, MIT: [How We Voted in 2022](#)
- [Views of election administration and confidence in vote counts](#), Pew Research Center, October 2022

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- Why are opinions on election processes so divided along party lines?
- How does disinformation impact the election process?
- What can be done to address disinformation and its impacts?

Community-Engaged and Experiential Activities

- [Sign up to serve as election workers](#). **College students can apply for federal work study to serve as election workers.** In February 2024, the Department of Education [issued a clarification](#) that permits [Federal Work Study](#) (FWS) funds to be used to hire college students to work in election offices. After the experience, ask students to reflect through discussion or written assignment: How did your experience as a poll worker or volunteer in your local office of elections impact your understanding of election processes and how elections are administered? How would you improve how elections are conducted? How did the experience impact your trust in how elections are run?
- Invite your local elections registrar/director or someone from your local board of elections to visit your classroom. Have them share about local elections and voter turnout, explain budget limitations and discuss challenges the board is working to overcome. Have students prepare questions for them ahead of time and recommendations for improving elections.
- Attend (virtually or in-person) a local board of elections meeting. Observe how the meeting is conducted and how decisions are made. After the meeting, ask students to reflect through discussion or written assignment: What issues does the board discuss? Who participates in the meeting and who doesn't? How are decisions regarding the election made? How must the board of elections work with other local and state elected and non-elected public officials? Also consider: assign students to prepare a public comment for the local board of elections meeting.
- Celebrate your local elections registrar/director and board of elections on [Election Hero Day](#).

- Organize an Op-Ed or letter writing campaign to educate the public and urge Members of Congress [to support anti-doxxing legislation to protect election workers](#), to [provide more funding to localities](#) and to [bolster election infrastructure](#).
- You and your students can [sign up to serve as](#) poll workers or pages. See what the [age requirements are in your state](#).

Assessment: Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- What role do free and fair elections play in democracy?
- How might differences in the way elections are conducted by state and local governments impact voter experience?
- What role does election administration play in ensuring legitimacy of election outcomes?
- How do unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud undermine the legitimacy of election administration and trust in elections?
- What are ways to increase confidence in elections and election administration?