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GROUP

DEMOCRACY FUND AND EARLY VOTING INFORMATION CENTER: LOCAL ELECTION OFFICIAL INTERVIEW REPORT

December 15, 2020



Introduction

The Democracy Fund (DF) and its partners at Reed College's Early Voting Information Center (EVIC) are engaged in the Stewards of Democracy study, a multiyear survey project to understand the backgrounds and views of the nation's local election officials (LEO). Although, to date, this work has primarily focused on opinion surveys, DF and EVIC were interested in adding a qualitative component to their project to round out the resulting picture of the nation's election administrators.

In August 2020, DF and EVIC partnered with election researchers at Fors Marsh Group (FMG) to conduct a series of in-depth interviews (IDI) with a group of 30 LEOs nationwide. The IDIs primarily focused on expanding on the key themes highlighted in the 2020 Stewards of Democracy survey results. A few of these themes included conducting more in-depth explorations into the career paths followed by LEOs, discussing the highs and lows of election administration, and seeking insights into how reforms and law changes affect LEOs.

Study Purpose

The Stewards of Democracy study seeks to understand the experiences of LEOs from across the country. In 2020, DF and EVIC wanted to expand this knowledge by conducting a first-of-its-kind qualitative research study. To date, it is the only study for which IDIs have been used to inform the professional backgrounds, motivations, stressors, and day-to-day work of election officials. In a general election year that saw the highest voter turnout in American history, unprecedented challenges, political division, and last-minute reforms, 30 LEOs took an hour out of their day to describe their experiences in election offices around the country.

Report Layout

This report provides an overview of the research effort and the findings from the IDIs conducted on behalf of the Stewards of Democracy project. In the first section, we discuss our approach to developing the interview guide, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. In the next section, we detail our findings from the interview data, and in the final section, we conclude the report with overarching findings.

Methodology

FMG worked closely with DF and EVIC to develop a research plan to best answer key research questions about the experiences of LEOs across the country. In this section, we detail the development of the moderator's guide, recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

Moderator's Guide

FMG developed the moderator's guide in collaboration with DF and EVIC. These interviews aimed to get a better understanding of LEOs from across the country. The final moderator's guide was divided into five sections: (1) Career Background and Planning, (2) Job Satisfaction, (3) Pay, (4) Impact of Reforms, and (5) Close Out. The moderator's guide

originally included a “job characteristic” sort activity, but it was subsequently removed due to time restrictions placed on the interviews.

The final moderator’s guide (see Appendix A) was approved by DF and EVIC team members.

Recruitment

EVIC provided FMG with an ordered list of 269 LEOs from across the country. Contact information was ranked to ensure diverse geographies and jurisdiction sizes and a blend of appointed versus elected officials, gender, and time in role. LEOs within the sample frame had previously completed the 2020 Stewards of Democracy survey and indicated their consent and willingness to participate in follow-up studies. A breakdown of final study participants is provided below (see Table A).

To recruit participants for this study, FMG used institutional review board-approved language to contact potential participants via email. Approximately 20 invitation emails were sent out per business day during the September 11–October 2, 2020, recruitment period. The recruitment language (see Appendix B) outlined the high-level details of the study, including that the one-on-one Zoom interviews would be about participants’ experiences as LEOs and would last approximately 60 minutes. Interested participants were asked to provide dates and times for their availability, and FMG staff subsequently contacted potential participants to schedule their remote sessions. Participants did not receive an honorarium to take part in the study.

Table A: Breakdown of Participants

Geographic Area	Position Type	Size	Tenure (Years)
Midwest	Appointed	5,001 to 25,000	>30
Midwest	Appointed	> 250,000	21–30
Midwest	Appointed	> 250,000	21–30
Midwest	Appointed	> 250,000	21–30
Midwest	Appointed	5,001 to 25,000	21–30
Midwest	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	21–30
Midwest	Appointed	> 250,000	21–30
Midwest	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	22–30
Midwest	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	11–20
Midwest	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	21–30
Midwest	Elected	100,001 to 250,000	<5
Midwest	Elected	5,001 to 25,000	11–20
Midwest	Elected	5,001 to 25,000	21–30
Midwest	Elected	100,001 to 250,000	11–20
Midwest	Elected	5,001 to 25,000	21–30
Midwest	Elected	25,001 to 100,000	21–30
Northeast	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	>30

Northeast	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	21-30
Northeast	Elected	5,001 to 25,000	21-30
Southeast	Appointed	100,001 to 250,000	21-30
Southeast	Appointed	> 250,000	11-20
Southeast	Appointed	25,001 to 100,000	21-30
Southeast	Elected	> 250,000	21-30
Southeast	Elected	> 250,000	>30
Southeast	Elected	5,001 to 25,000	21-30
West	Appointed	> 250,000	21-30
West	Appointed	> 250,000	21-30
West	Appointed	100,001 to 250,000	>30
West	Appointed	100,001 to 250,000	11-20
West	Elected	25,001 to 100,000	11-20
West	Elected	100,001 to 250,000	>30
West	Elected	100,001 to 250,000	>30
West	Elected	5,001 to 25,000	>30

Data Collection

To interview a geographically diverse sample of LEOs, FMG used Zoom conferencing software to conduct remote interviews. Participants were encouraged to use web cameras or built-in laptop cameras to simulate a face-to-face conversation. Below we outline the details of our data collection.

Interviews

Between September 14 and October 8, 2020, FMG conducted 30 one-on-one interviews via Zoom. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes. There was one primary moderator and two primary notetakers for these sessions. Before the interview, participants were sent an Outlook calendar invitation with the date and time of their interview and were provided the Zoom connectivity information.

At the start of each interview, participants were told that their participation is voluntary, their information would be kept confidential, a few people may be observing the session, and the session would be audio recorded. Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to confirm their consent to record the session. All recordings were transcribed via a third-party transcription company and shared with DF and EVIC through a secure file transfer protocol (SFTP).

Findings

Career Backgrounds

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked about their path to becoming an election official. Following that question, the moderator probed on what motivates LEOs to stay within the elections field. Detailed findings from these responses are below.

Career Path

LEOs reported a variety of career paths that led them to their positions. Few LEOs had much experience with elections before entering the field. When asked about their path to becoming an election official, many LEOs described a winding narrative. Participants often explained that they came to work in elections from a variety of professional backgrounds, including government, administrative work, accounting and finance, and information technology. The majority of elected LEOs came from a career in government or politics. After probing on their motivations to run for office, one elected LEO said:

“I took a part-time job in our community—we’re in a small town—working with what is like our chamber of commerce. Did that for 10 years, being active with the community ... that led to me eventually running for office here, trying to have a voice in the direction of our community.”

When asked for additional details about how participants ended up in the elections field, they often cited personal connections to the city or county government that they work in or applying to a position with little to no knowledge of the role. When asked what they knew about elections before seeking out their role, one LEO said:

“Not a lot. I was fairly young. I knew I’d somehow be facilitating elections. I knew the job description was broad, and I’d have a hand in absentee voting, campaign finance ... that’s ... I didn’t know much. I didn’t know about elections. I didn’t even know what a municipal election was or primaries. I had zero knowledge.”

Even elected officials described an indirect, almost apprenticeship path to working in the elections field:

“Before this, my experience varied from construction to working in law offices ... I worked in the office under the previous clerk as a part-time employee, then bumped up to full-time employee while working another full-time job. The previous clerk passed away in office and another deputy finished the term and then I ran and won the election.”

The LEOs all expressed enthusiasm about their work, whether they came to the field already interested in elections or just by happenstance. For example, compare these two stories:

“A long time ago, my grandmother ... grew up during the suffrage movement... It was instilled in me at an early age that voting was important. She grew up in rural PA; she wasn’t in it, but she grew up in it, and that importance of voting was instilled in me from an early age. My mother was a poll worker. I’d see her Monday night when I went to bed, and then I wouldn’t see her until Wednesday when I got home from school because they counted ballots by hand. I took my mom’s job as presiding judge—manager of the polling place/counting—in 1992. I put in 22 years as a poll worker, and then served as clerk of the city council...”

“It’s actually kinda random. I went to [the state university] in 2001 for computer science. At the time, they were going through changing technology. They needed someone to help carry that [new equipment] around, and I was good at that. I then was dating someone who had a friend at Waffle House... I got nervous and then ended up in elections for more steady—I didn’t want to end up at Waffle House after 4 years. Elections—it’s one of those things you fall into. It’s a little crazy to do it, but it is a lot of fun.”

Career and Transition Planning

Participants were asked how long they intend to stay in their role as an election official. The moderator also probed on participants’ reasons for their timelines, how they manage transition planning, and what training opportunities exist in their offices, both for new election officials and office staff.

Next Steps for LEOs

Most participants (18 out of 30) had no plans to leave the elections field within the next few years. Of the LEOs who said they intend to leave the elections field, many cited that they are waiting to qualify for retirement to do so. When probed on their motivations for retirement, the vast majority of LEOs mentioned time in role and age. Only one LEO stated that they plan to retire due to the stress and difficulties associated with their position. Appointed LEOs reported having plans to retire in higher numbers than their elected counterparts, whereas elected LEOs discussed their desires to run for re-election. One participant said, “[My] term is up in 2022, definitely want to run again (at least 8 more years).”

Table B: Time Planned to Stay in Role

Time planned to stay in role	Number of LEOs
0–2 years	3
3–5 years	3
6–10 years	5
10+ years	15
No Date Given	4

The LEOs who do not plan to retire but are thinking of leaving their role said they intend to stay within the elections field, although not necessarily as an election official. One election official stated that she would like to do *“something new in elections, not a full retirement. Maybe consulting work, or teaching ... this election has made me realize we need to do a much better job in our country for education at high school and college levels regarding elections.”*

Transition Planning

Few of the participants, regardless of elected versus appointed status said they have formal transition plans or documented procedures in place for their staff or eventual successors. In general, most LEOs said that they expect their second-in-command (e.g., deputy, deputy clerk, assistant manager) to take over their role when they leave the position. Some LEOs mentioned having informal processes and plans in place for transitions, and only one participant mentioned having no plans at all in place. Of LEOs with informal plans in place, they cited learning on the job for new employees and successors:

“Training was jumping in and getting the job done. Of course, there’s training related to statewide ... I did those and some national trainings. But the early part of May and June were elections! I had to learn—baptism by fire. Colleagues are a great resource; I always try to reach out to them. Your colleagues are critical to get through the challenges as registrars. And the expertise of your staff. They have the knowledge, know the specifics of how to run things. There’s never been an election like this so we’re all going through it and experiencing it firsthand.”

Some LEOs expressed hesitations about the resources that are available at the state level:

“Our Secretary of State isn’t that strong, and their staff is... I don’t want to slam them too much, other than when you call/email you can get one answer, and then someone else can do it and get another answer. But they don’t have enough staff and that’s part of the problem. They used to have an excellent elections staff, well trained ... but they have almost no people now. How do you run elections, be the chief elections official, with no people?! That’s been hard. We don’t have anyone helping us from the top down, giving us hard, good directions. Or really ... we need someone who understands how things run on the municipal level to give us good directions. If they don’t understand how it runs, how can they give directions?”

When asked what someone would need to know in order to take over their role, LEOs cited a variety of professional competencies, including meeting and tracking multiple deadlines, completing formal trainings and certificates, and understanding how the election process and election systems function. Upon further probing about specific characteristics that their successor might need, seven LEOs said that having knowledge of election laws and regulations is essential, six mentioned the importance of remaining nonpartisan, another six

LEOs said the ability to work under pressure, and five reported the necessity of being a people person.

In regard to running elections at the local level, one LEO said, *“My goal is for the election to run safely, smoothly, and accurately. Anything towards that end we support. But things often get caught up in partisan issues rather than what makes sense.”*

Training Opportunities

Both elected and appointed LEOs mentioned that most of the opportunities are in-person, on-the-job trainings, including being involved with the day-to-day activities of the election office and shadowing more experienced employees¹. LEOs mentioned more formal training, including professional development activities such as role play to practice poll worker training and the completion of certificates or other formal education. Additionally, five participants specifically mentioned receiving their Certified Elections Registration Administrator (CERA) certification through the Election Center. Others mentioned trainings conducted at the state level for government employees such as specific courses for county clerks or auditors.

Elections Network

The moderator also questioned participants about their network within the election community, including professional organizations and relationships with other LEOs. The moderator probed about the support they receive from the election community, as well as what that support is like.

Sense of Community

When asked, almost every participant confirmed a sense of community among election officials. When asked about finding a sense of support in the elections community, one LEO said, *“Absolutely. That’s one of the real gems about the elections world—we’re all in it together. We’re very supportive of each other.”*

LEOs said that they feel especially close to other election officials in nearby counties and throughout their state. According to participants, there is a strong theme of support and empathy among fellow LEOs. A few participants stated that they have met lifelong friends from their time within the election community. Other LEOs stated the importance of helping fellow election officials. One participant said:

“I’ve got telephone numbers on the wall of everybody in every county—the director, like I am, and I know I can call any of them and say, ‘What’s going on?,’ or ‘How do you do this?,’ or whatever. Now, because of my experience a lot of those people are

¹ LEOs provided no mention of shadowing election officials from other jurisdictions over the course of their interviews.

calling me! I know a lot of the history behind certain issues, like curbside voting, how we got into that and why. There's a tremendous amount of history with it."

A minority of LEOs also noted that they have found a sense of community through Twitter. One LEO said, *"When I have time I like getting on Twitter and seeing what elections nerds are talking about. It's nice seeing I'm not the only one passionate about the process and making sure people trust the process! That's a little virtual and I don't engage a lot, but I do like going on there sometimes."*

Many LEOs brought up the ways in which the pandemic has affected their interactions with fellow election officials. Participants said that before the COVID-19 pandemic, they would often have regular in-person get-togethers to discuss sources of stress and to troubleshoot specific issues in their jurisdiction. Because of the pandemic, LEOs have been forced online, turning to social media, Zoom calls, and group chats to communicate. Some LEOs said that although they understand the need to communicate this way, it has somewhat diminished the utility of their network.

Professional Organizations and Resources

Almost all of the LEOs stated that they belong to at least one professional organization. When asked what organizations they belong to, LEOs cited organizations at the national and state level. Nationally, LEOs mentioned belonging to groups such as the Election Center, the International Association of Government Officials, task forces associated with the Center for Tech and Civic Life, the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center, and the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center. At the state level, LEOs frequently mentioned being members of professional organizations that more directly serve their role in local government (i.e., their state's Association of County Clerks and Election Authorities, their state's Township Association, and their state's Municipal Clerks Association). When probed on how LEOs find these organizations, the majority reported that they were expected to join state-level organizations and then subsequently learned about the national organizations through colleagues.

Overall, LEOs reported finding a great deal of benefit from belonging to organizations at the state and national level. One LEO emphasized the types of support they receive from national organizations, saying *"I get ideas for how other states do things, which is fantastic. I get a lot of the intangible, networking—meeting other people and being able to tap into knowledge/experience at a later time."* Another LEO spoke highly of their state's association, saying *"My [state's] association—[they] organize conferences three times a year, ask for input on what kind of classes we want and what we want to learn, they listen and try to provide the education we need. Great resource."*

Job Satisfaction and Stressors

Participating LEOs were asked about their levels of job satisfaction, rated on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being highest. The moderator also asked about primary sources of stress in their positions, including the stress of this year (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, the general election) and how this year compared to previous election years.

Satisfaction With Role

Almost all of the LEOs reported having high levels of job satisfaction within their role. When asked to rate their overall satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, on average, LEOs rated their level of overall job satisfaction as an 8.6, with 5.5 being the lowest score reported. When asked what some of the contributing factors to their satisfaction are, LEOs cited their love for the elections process, the variety of tasks in their day-to-day work, the team of people that they collaborate with, and their ability to make a positive impact. One LEO said:

“It’s rewarding. If we do our jobs right, people exercise their right to vote. Every time I answer the phone or an email, I’m helping a voter. Every time we push bills that improve election processes, or voter registration ... it’s all to help people. No matter how hard the day is, we know we helped someone that day.”

Another LEO discussed the importance of their job, saying:

“There’s something at the end of the day, knowing the most fundamental aspect of our country was carried out from president to school board. ...We had a transition of power, and people had faith in the results, in the votes counted being valid.”

Burnout and Fatigue

Although most election officials said they enjoy their role, some expressed a sense of burnout or fatigue. When asked about some of the factors that have led to this burnout or fatigue, LEOs discussed the unique challenges they faced in the 2020 General Election. One election official summed up their feelings by, saying:

“I’m exceeding my capacity for dealing with it. I’m tired, constantly. It’s stressful. I go home and crash, get up and do it again the next day. I think all election officials right now are kind of in that same boat. Presidential elections are always stressful but this one seems hyper stressful, at least to me personally.”

A shared sentiment among LEOs was that the 2020 election was a particularly stressful one due to the pandemic, political pressure, misinformation, and staffing concerns. One LEO discussed how the pandemic has affected their role, saying:

“I’m used to being physically exhausted—But, I’m emotionally exhausted [this time]. These should not be life and death decisions. I have employees at higher risk who I

need at work—How do I keep them safe? I very much feel the weight of these decisions.”

Another LEO spoke at length about how the spread of misinformation has affected them, saying:

“[There is an] avalanche of mis- and disinformation and not knowing how to combat that. Something can travel so quickly on social media it becomes a blaze before you even know it’s there. A lot of folks who have a situation they don’t understand and move forward with comments that pick up steam before fact-checking with local election officials.”

Stressors

The moderator also asked LEOs about the day-to-day stressors of their job, including stressors that persist during off-cycle years. Responses to this line of questioning were divided between staffing and budget concerns and legislative reforms. One LEO said that they have a difficult time managing the staff portion of their role, saying:

“Honestly, I think it’s the administration of an office, not even having to do with elections—being a boss and having to deal with personnel issues. Election part most of the time is not that bad. It’s personnel issues—hiring/firing is never fun, admin stuff for the county, performance appraisals, budget. It’s necessary, but it’s not my cup of tea.”

Other LEOs pointed out that budget constraints have led to increased stress because they have to limit the number of staff they have on hand at any given time.

A few LEOs mentioned concerns about the relationship between their office and their state. Participants cited issues stemming from last-minute reforms, a lack of communication, and little to no political buy-in. In regard to legislative reforms, one LEO said, “Legislators don’t appreciate the level of effort to implement these programs and have made several large-scale changes [in the past few years].” Another LEO echoed these sentiments, saying:

“Law changes are constant in [state]. [We] had a voter ID law, then we didn’t. Now, there’s a lawsuit...With these legal matters and the outcome of the legal matters, it dictates how we go about conducting the elections. Sometimes law changes come down at the last minute, which adds to the challenges of the work.”

Participants expressed that a lack of funding is the primary obstacle they face when trying to implement reforms or technology. One LEO described the situation, saying:

“Funding... you can’t just go out and buy this, get that software or license agreement. You won’t get paid for it. There is my board—I have to get buy-in from the board and depending on their state of mind, it can be difficult.”

Another LEO spoke of the needs of their office, saying “[We] never have enough resources... always need one more programmer, one more assistant, one more.”

Compensation

Participants were asked during the interview whether they considered their own compensation to be fair. The moderator followed this question by asking about their opinions regarding the compensation of their office staff, how they benchmark their own compensation as well as that of their staff, and about any potential disparities in compensation.

Satisfaction With Personal Compensation

When asked, the majority of LEOs expressed satisfaction with their current compensation, regardless of their jurisdiction size or elected status². Many LEOs acknowledged that although they are satisfied with their compensation, they still consider themselves underpaid. Upon further probing, LEOs acknowledged that their compensation is enough to support themselves and their families, but that it is still too low considering the amount of work and responsibility placed upon them. Some LEOs noted that this is especially true during election years, with one LEO stating, *“If I averaged out my salary for my hourly rate, it’d be much too low,”* and another LEO saying, *“In an election year, when working long hours, I probably make less than my staff members when you break it down hourly.”* Not surprisingly, the LEOs who expressed dissatisfaction with their compensation also considered themselves underpaid. Some participants noted that the compensation they receive for the elections component of their role is not high enough due to workload and stressors but that the compensation they receive for their other duties (e.g., as clerks) makes their pay acceptable.

Many LEOs also noted that although they are compensated fairly, they know many counterparts in other jurisdictions who are underpaid. One LEO stated, *“I would say I am fairly compensated, but there’s a lot of places I could go and say, ‘Hell no—the county next door makes half what I do.’”*

Office Staff Compensation

Most LEOs expressed concern for their office staff’s compensation. They said they worry about the ability to retain talent without offering raises or comparable salaries for similar positions in the private sector or in neighboring counties. A few LEOs said that they have not advocated for higher pay for themselves in the past few years, but they have advocated for raises for their staff with city or county officials. Additionally, a number of LEOs brought up concerns with the quality of the applicants they receive due to low wages. One LEO mentioned being concerned about the ability to replace their own position, stating *“You get*

² There was no significant difference found in overall satisfaction with compensation between elected versus appointed LEOs and LEOs in small versus large jurisdictions. Note that that the small sample size (n=30), does not lend itself to generalizable findings.

what you pay for. The qualifications, experience, quality of the people you have in these positions is directly related to how much they're compensated."

When asked about cost-of-living increases or pay raises for their staff, many said that their staff is provided with cost-of-living increases or yearly merit pay increases. When further probed, LEOs mentioned that these pay raises are often around 2%. LEOs were also asked about opportunities for advancement for their staff members. Most participants said that there is little, if any, opportunity for upward mobility in their offices and that staff members are often forced to "move out, to move up." LEOs said that the staff members who leave their offices often move on to higher paying positions within the county government or move to an election's office in another county. One LEO said:

"There's never been a new position created, that I know of. ... The only way for a deputy to move up would be to become a director, and the only way for that would be for me or a counterpart to leave."

Benchmarking Compensation

The majority of participants said they benchmark their own compensation and that of their staff to elections staff in other counties or jurisdictions of similar size and population, this is constant regardless of the jurisdiction size that an LEO works within. One LEO said, "We compare ourselves to other communities of relatively the same size. Our community is ... we don't have a strong tax base. We're pretty much homes, we don't have a lot of business. We're not the highest paid for sure." Many LEOs also said that they benchmark compensation to other departments with similar levels of responsibility within their own county, such as city administrators or city auditors or, if applicable, other elected positions within the county, such as the sheriff or county assessor (see Appendix C). Of the LEOs who benchmark their salary against similar roles within the county, almost all of the LEOs said they feel that they are underpaid in comparison. One LEO said:

"I know I'm woefully underpaid when I look at what the DA [district attorney] and the sheriff get. ... There are only three county-wide elected positions—the sheriff, DA, county assessor (the other hat I wear). They are making significantly more than I do, even within my own county. There's definitely a need to revisit that."

Additionally, a few LEOs noted using salary surveys or similar administrative surveys to compare compensation within the state.

Disparities in Compensation

In general, many of the participants said they are concerned about disparities in compensation, and only a few LEOs expressed no concern about compensation disparity. Of the LEOs who indicated that there is a disparity in compensation, most also expressed a belief that gender is tied to the compensation disparity. Some LEOs acknowledged that holding an elected position—as opposed to appointed position—may also contribute to the

compensation disparity. A few LEOs caveated some of the perceived disparities by pointing out that differences in county structure, population size, role expectations, and number of staff may affect pay.

Conclusion

LEOs are passionate about their work and take the responsibilities placed upon them to run the country's elections seriously. In regard to the importance of their role, one election official said:

"I think the most important role I have in my position is to instill trust and be available to voters and available to party members—people who are within the county. If the press calls, I'm available, so they know if they have questions about the process, they can come to me. Instilling trust, that's what I consider my most important role, not necessarily the day to day—absentee ballots and things like that."

Another election official emphasized the work that goes into the job, saying:

"I want the public to know we're not doing it because we have to—I mean, I do have to—but that I enjoy it. I take it very seriously that it is accurate. I want the public to know it is not as simple as they make it sound."

Appendices

Appendix A

Introduction (5 minutes)

Thank you for participating in this study today. My name is Emily Lauter, and I work as a researcher at Fors Marsh Group, a private research firm based out of Arlington, Virginia. Today, we are helping the Democracy Fund and Reed College as part of the Stewards of Democracy study that has been ongoing since 2018 with the goal of understanding the experiences of local election officials and lifting up their voices.

I will be asking you a series of questions related to your work as a local election official. I am not associated with your state or local election office so please do not feel like you have to hold back on your thoughts or opinions to be kind to me. I am simply looking for honest and candid feedback so that I can pass that along to the research team in order for them to get a more complete picture of your experience as an election official.

The entire session should last about 60 minutes. Do you have any questions so far?

Let's cover a couple things before we get started:

- We are going to make an audio recording during the session today. Only those of us associated with this project will have access to these recordings, and the recordings will not contain any of your personally identifiable information. The recordings are primarily used as a reminder for me so I can go back later to recall what happened during each session.
- There are no wrong answers to the questions that I will be asking. I am just looking for honest and candid feedback to pass along to the research team.
- There is another researcher listening in with me taking notes during our discussion today and other project members may join the session to observe.
- Your participation is voluntary, and you can stop or withdraw at any time. Also, you do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable with.
- Your name and other personally identifiable information will not be included in our reports. Your comments will only be used in combination with the feedback that we get from other people.
- This research has been reviewed by the Institutional Research Board at Reed College. If you have any questions or concerns about this research or your rights, please feel free to contact Michael Pitts at mpitts@reed.edu or call [503-517-7721](tel:503-517-7721).

Do you have any questions before we begin the session?

Okay, great. I'm going to begin the recording. First, I would like to ask you a couple questions to learn about your career.

Section 1: Career Background and Planning (15 minutes)

1.1. What was your path like to becoming an election official?

- a) What did you know about this job before seeking out your role?
 - b) **[Probe if necessary]** What drew you to the field of election administration?
- 1.2.** How long have you served as a local election official?
- a) **For how much longer do you intend to stay in your role?**
 - i. What factors contribute to that timeline?
 - ii. What are three things you would deem essential for a new election official taking over your role to know?
- 1.3. [IF RETIRING OR LEAVING SOON]** Have you started to think of the transition plan for your office?
- a) **[If Yes]** What does that plan look like for your office?
 - i. How far out do you plan to start that transition process?
 - b) **[If Yes]** Do you have documented policies and procedures that could be passed along to the next election official?
- 1.4. [IF NOT RETIRING]** What do you envision as the next stage of your career?
- a) How do you think that your skillset might prepare you for your next role?
 - b) What might be some advantages of your experience in your search for a future job?
 - i. What about disadvantages?

Section 2: Job Satisfaction (15 minutes)

- 2.1.** On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the least satisfied and 10 is the most satisfied, where would you put yourself in terms of overall job satisfaction?
- a) For what reasons do you rate it a __?
 - b) Do you think that there could be anything done to help increase your level of overall job satisfaction?
 - i. **[IF YES]** Where do you think that support might come from?
- 2.2.** What are some of your concerns as it pertains to the 2020 General Election?
- a) How, if at all, do you think this election compares to previous elections that you've run?
- 2.3.** Now, thinking beyond the 2020 election year, what are the primary factors that cause this job to be stressful?
- a) What factors make this job more or less stressful from year to year?
 - b) How much does uncertainty about factor into your level of job satisfaction?
- 2.4. Do you feel a sense of burnout or fatigue in your role?**
- a) **[IF YES]** What are some of the key reasons for that?

- b) **[IF NO]** What are some of the policies in place that might prevent you from experiencing burnout or fatigue?
- c) Do you think that the size of your jurisdiction plays a role? What about political atmosphere?

2.5. Is there a system in place outside of your organization that allows you to seek support if needed? (I.e., resources, materials, professional networks, or local colleagues.)

- a) **[IF YES]** What does that support look like for you?
 - i. Who is supporting you?
 - ii. What do you most often seek support for?
- b) **[IF NO]** What would you like a support system to look like?
 - i. Where do you imagine this help coming from?

2.6. Are you part of any professional organizations?

- a) **[IF YES]** What professional organizations are you apart of? (Probe on non-election organizations if needed.)
 - i. How did you find these professional organizations?
 - ii. What motivated you to join these professional organizations?
- b) Are there any organizations in which you are not a member of but utilize as a resource?
 - i. **[IF YES]** Which organizations are these?
 - ii. **[IF YES]** What types of information do you get out of these organizations?

2.7. Do you find a sense of community within the elections field?

- a) What does that support look like for you?
- b) **[IF MEMBERS OF NON-ELECTION ORGANIZATIONS]** How does the support within the election's community compare to what you receive from their other professional organizations?

2.8. What are some of the challenges and opportunities you face in your position?

2.9. What aspects of your position make it rewarding for you?

Section 3: Pay (10 minutes)

3.1. In thinking about your ideal job characteristics, where would you rank pay and benefits in terms of importance to you?

3.2. Do you feel that you are fairly compensated for the work that you do?

- a) When you think about being paid fairly, who do you compare yourself to? (I.e., private sector, other local government agencies, election officials in other jurisdictions?)
- b) For what reasons do you compare yourself to that group?

- c) When you are making pay decisions for your staff, who, if anyone, do you benchmark your staff against?

3.3. [IF ELECTED] How much did you know about your compensation before running for your position?

3.4. How concerned are you about possible disparities in pay across your field?

- a) What factors do you think contribute to these possible disparities?
 - i. **[Probe if necessary]** Do you think gender might play a role in possible pay disparities in your field?
 - ii. **[Probe if necessary]** Do you think that being elected or appointed might play a role in possible pay disparities?
 - iii. **[Probe if necessary]** Would disparities impact you or your staff?

3.5. Has your jurisdiction conducted a market study to evaluate pay in the last few years?

- a) **[IF YES]** Who performed this work?
 - i. What were your thoughts about the quality of this work?
 - ii. What were the outcomes of this work?

3.6. Does your office have a built-in cost of living increase?

- a) Has that increase impacted you or your staff directly? If so, how?

Section 4: Impact of Reforms (10 minutes)

4.1. How have changes in election law affected your position?

4.2. How much uncertainty do you experience due to changes in election law?

- a) Is there anything that your state can do to decrease this level of uncertainty?

4.3. What example can you provide regarding the implementation of a specific election tool that has impacted your office?

- a) What was that adaption process like?
- b) What obstacles did you experience when that reform was put into place?

4.4. Are you aware of any innovations or tools that you would like to implement for your jurisdiction?

- a) **[IF YES]** What are some examples of these reforms?
 - i. Where did you learn about these reforms?
- b) **[IF YES]** What are some of the obstacles involved in getting your ideas implemented?

Section 5: Close Out (5 minutes)

5.1. Would you recommend becoming an election official to others? Why or why not?

5.2. What is one thing that I didn't ask that you think I should know?

5.3. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share with me today?

Thank you very much for participating in this session. I appreciate your time and great feedback.

Appendix B

Good afternoon [Name],

You recently completed a survey as part of the **Stewards of Democracy Project**, which seeks to understand the experiences of LEOs and lift up their voices. In your responses to that survey, you indicated that you would be willing to speak further with us about your experiences as an election official. I am reaching out to you to take part in an in-depth interview on behalf of the Democracy Fund and Reed College.

The interview session will last 60 minutes and will be conducted remotely via Zoom. A researcher will be asking you questions about your experiences as an election official.

We will be conducting sessions from **September 14th to October 8th**. **Please send a few dates and times that work best with your schedule.** Once your timeslot is confirmed, we will send an email with additional information on how to join the session.

I look forward to hearing from you! Please let me know if you have any questions.

Appendix C

Benchmark	Appointed	Elected
Other election officials (in-state, other jurisdictions)	10	2
Other elected officials (in-state, other jurisdictions)	0	1
Other elected officials (same jurisdiction)	0	1
Other department heads/directors (same jurisdiction)	3	0
Other department heads/directors (in-state, other jurisdictions)	0	1
Parks and Recreation (same jurisdiction)	1	0
Veterans Services (same jurisdiction)	1	0
City Administrator (same jurisdiction)	0	1
City Controller (same jurisdiction)	1	0
County Assessor (same jurisdiction)	0	1
County Auditor (same jurisdiction)	0	1
Tax Collector (same jurisdiction)	1	0
Manager/Technology Manager	0	1
Standardized benchmark used by county	0	1
Salary surveys	1	0

Appendix D

Jurisdiction	Salary Survey	Elected/Appointed
Clark County	Yes	Appointed
Forsyth County	Yes	Appointed
Davison County	Yes	Elected
Mason County	Yes	Elected
Highland Township - Oakland County	Yes	Elected
Mower County	Yes	Appointed
Dakota County	Yes	Appointed
City of Janesville - Rock County	Yes (by HR)	Appointed
Deschutes County	Yes	Elected
Bartow County	Yes	Appointed
Boxford Town	Yes	Elected
Wayne County	Yes	Appointed