

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2022 MEETING

**Buffeted by Many Storms: Local Election Official Survey Findings from 2018-2022**

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Local election officials (LEOs) are a diverse group of public servants, situated in jurisdictions that vary from small, homogeneous townships with just a few hundred voters; sparsely populated rural counties with voters distributed over hundreds of square miles; medium sized cities and metropolitan areas; suburban counties that are parts of urban metropolises; and densely populated counties with millions of voters. In many cases, LEOs serve mixes of these population areas: some urban, suburban, rural, and indigenous and tribal areas. The role of the LEO across these diverse settings is in some respects the same – ensure access to the ballot by candidates, parties, and other political organizations; deliver democracy to the eligible voting population; and canvass, audit, and certify the election results in a transparent manner and on a timely basis. The reality is that the scope of a local election administrator’s duties and the nature of their work can vary as widely as the people, places, and politics of this vast country.

Situated at on one end of the spectrum is a local election official who runs a one=person shop in a small township or rural county. The local election official (LEO) in this setting maintains voter registration files and administers elections, and may also be tasked with managing council meeting minutes, issuing pet licenses, and keeping records for the community cemetery. This LEO likely was born in or has lived for a long time in their local community, and elections work provided an interesting opportunity to pursue public service and feed their interest in politics and elections. This person is one of approximately 8,000 local elections official in the United States

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Situated at the other end of the spectrum is an official who might more accurately be as a CEO rather than LEO. These officials manage hundreds of staff in county offices that serve a constituencies with populations greater than states in the US. For example, if the most populous county in the United States, Los Angeles County, CA were a country, it would rank as the 94th largest, just behind Portugal. The second most populous, Cook County, IL would rank 124th, just behind Liberia, and even the 10th most populous, Riverside County, CA would still rank 149th, just behind Namibia and ahead of Gabon. An LEO in these offices faces a complex and shifting landscape of administering elections to a large and highly diverse population, managing a large budget, and working with large staffs. This LEO has most likely spent their professional career developing election specific tools and skills through education and professional development and is a specialist in the field.

These two vignettes provide a glimpse of the administration challenges facing local election officials as well as the research challenge facing those who want to understand and advance this community. While the central role of LEOs in the elections system has been recognized at least since Harris's (1934) initial engagement, LEOs have not been the focus of election researchers until the groundbreaking work in the 2002-2004 period following the passage of the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) and the national spotlight on local administrative decision making and how it impacted the 2000 Presidential election (Montjoy 2010; Kimball and Kropf 2006; Fischer and Coleman 2005). This paper provides a summary of the research efforts flowing from this time period post-HAVA and provides a unique overview of four years of survey findings from the Democracy Fund/Reed College (DF/RC) Local Election Official Surveys in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2022. By providing this overview, we hope to share a new set of data tools for understanding the challenges that face election administrators in the US. Each year of the LEO survey opens with a note to election officials that we hope to amplify their voices and concerns, and ideally help inform both future research and policy development. By sharing the past four years of the survey data we hope to spark new collaboration and research that can amplify the voices of the stewards of democracy.

The administration of elections in the US is a decentralized system with a complex

set of diverse institutional arrangements that vary across states and sub-state jurisdictions. These election administration arrangements have been referred to as a “crazy quilt” (Hale 2015, p. 4), with variation not limited to just across jurisdictions, but also in definitions of who counts as a LEO. Further, the sets of tasks or roles that a LEO is responsible for within election administration vary greatly and may be in addition to other non-elections tasks they conduct as a part of their position. Depending on the criteria used, there are between 8,000 (Kimball and Baybeck 2013) and 10,000 (GAO 2001) local jurisdictions with some role in election administration in the US.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this complexity, the past two decades have witnessed growing challenges for LEOs. In 2010 Montjoy reflected on the decade rapid change in US election administration created by the policy responses to the challenges 2020 election (2010). Demands on LEOs, and the increasing costs of administering elections were highlighted at the time. Today that “decade of change” is now approaching a generation of change, and a generation that has experienced headwinds from more sources than one could have anticipated. LEOs have had to become experts on technology, cyber security, and, in 2020, even public health. All are expected to have informative websites and a social media presence that helps to educate citizens, report election results, and provide historical information on election returns. They all have increasingly drawn attention from the media, national commentators, and citizen activists of all stripes, unfortunately sometimes veering into threats and harassment. And nearly all have experienced the pressures of insufficient budgets combined with new laws, regulations, and administrative procedures.

The goal for this paper is to provide a descriptive overview of LEO attitudes over time. The first section briefly introduces the history and previous efforts of studying LEOs. Then some key theoretical concerns around administrative perspectives are discussed to help frame the choices made to analyze responses. The paper then presents the findings organized by four substantive election policy or administration areas. First, we explore the different workloads and demands on LEOs at various jurisdictions across the US. Here we are particularly interested in challenges of admin-

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<sup>1</sup>The variation in this number is due to the sharing of responsibilities by multiple officers or officers for different portions of the election process in some states. GAO focus on deploying election technology includes a broader set of election administrators than our definition that is focused on Election Day responsibilities.

istrative burden and elements of job satisfaction (Burden et al. 2012; Gordon 2011; Gordon, Osgood Jr, and Phillips 2010). The third section then reports the findings from the survey in four general topics: 1) Workload and Job Satisfaction; 2) Voter-centric Attitudes; 3) Preparedness for Election Administration; and finally Confidence in Election Administration. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings both for further research and for policy development.

## **1. Studying the Stewards: Why Administrative Perspectives Matter**

A common public perspective is that public administrators in general and LEOs in particular should be *instrumental actors*, implementing the will of the democratically elected representatives of the people. This simple equation has many challenges, and is may not be desirable from a policy implementation perspective. If we find that administrators are more than just vessels for policy work, then they have substantive role in outcomes through their choices and judgement. For these reasons, it is important to understand their values, opinions, and experiences.

Local officials and front-line administrators work within a complex system that often relies on the careful exercise of discretion (Lipsky 2010). The diversity of this administrative work prevents creating simple common operating procedures and present challenges for vertical oversight and control. Uncertainties, special cases, and exogenous shocks often make the work of local government dependent on conditions= on the ground. Studies of these decision makers have focused on classic examples such as law enforcement or social work, however local elections also present similar challenges. In the course of their work, LEOs interpret law and policy, make choices on the distribution of resources, and decide which priorities are selected over others priorities. Concerns have been raised about how election administration is structured in such a way as to make transparency, monitoring, and oversight a challenge (Alvarez and Hall 2006). The concern from this perspective is that LEOs work in short flurries of activity where decisions are vested in individuals with limited oversight.

Another more optimistic perspective recognizes that local administrators have developed a form of tacit knowledge that provides special skills for prudential judgement

(Morgan et al. 2013). Under this model local administrators, including LEOs, develop specialized knowledge through tackling the daily challenge they face. This is a form of learning that only happens through professional practice. Instead of seeing the diversity of procedures and steps as a problem for administration, this tacit knowledge perspective argues that LEOs respond to the uncertainties by developing a set of unique skills and experiences that allow them to “fill the gaps” in rules or procedures. Under these conditions, what counts for success is cultivating prudential judgement that can account for fine nuances across choices based on professional experience. Prudential judgment can be defined as “relating good ends to appropriate means” (Morgan et al. 2013, 142). A related skill in this tacit knowledge is a “feel for the whole,” or the ability to develop a strategic sense of how systems work (Morgan et al. 2013, 42-44). With this sense of the whole, administrators also develop a sense of when things are going well and when they are going wrong, based on professional service, norms and values around elections, as well as formal training.

This second perspective underscores that the work of LEOs is more than just an instrumental set of tasks; the role includes elements of policy development and implementation. Despite old habits to perceive administrators as non-political actors, this framing of LEOs acknowledges the unique role they play spanning the false dichotomy between politics and administration (Svara 2001). These administrators occupy both autonomous bureaucratic roles along with responsive public official roles. This creates a tension between professionalization and politicization that administrators manage by carefully knowing when to cross the boundary and for the right reasons (Svara 2006), echoing the ideas of prudential judgement. It is important to note that we are not suggesting that LEOs are “political actors” according to the conventional usage of the term, making decisions that benefit one or another political party or political interest, rather that the discretion and autonomy provided to the LEO make them much more than just a cog in a large bureaucratic machine.

Conceptualizing local election officials as active participants in our democracy raises some immediate questions: What do they see as the critical problems facing their work? What policy perspectives do they carry to the position? How is the work of an LEO impacting these views, most notably during stressful periods of change or outside

pressures? The survey findings reported in this paper seek to address these questions and in doing so, better understand what motivates these stewards of democracy.

## **2. Surveying the Stewards: Past and Current Efforts to Assess Administrative Perspectives**

Administering elections is a diverse interaction of federal, state, and local governments and priorities (Hale and Slaton 2008). These interactions include the private sector as election offices rely on equipment and supply vendors to manage voter registration, administer election conduct, and secure data and information. These mission-critical tasks have raised calls to better understand *who* LEOs are, *how they are prepared and supported* by those outside the local jurisdiction, and what *resources* help them to meet the challenges of modern election administration. Understanding both the make-up and perspectives of LEOs has been a focus of several waves of survey research over the past 15 years (Moynihan and Silva 2008; Kimball and Kropf 2006; Burden et al. 2013). These initial research efforts centered on understanding the implementation of HAVA. HAVA presented an opportunity to study election administration during an active period of policy change and reform in the US. These surveys provide a baseline on the policy and administrative perspectives of LEOs.

Beginning in 2018, the DF/RC Local Election Official Survey (LEOS) was first fielded in advance of the November elections.<sup>2</sup> The 2018 survey focused on preparedness for the 2018 election along with policy perspectives on early voting. Notably 2018 concerns were primarily focused on the ongoing shifts to various early voting options and defense against cyber-security impacts. The 2018 survey, and subsequent years also included a battery of questions that assess voter-centric attitudes. These items are meant to assess how LEOs see their own role in electoral processes in the US. The 2019 LEOS took advantage of the off-cycle year to explore job satisfaction and career development dynamics across LEOs. The 2020 survey design rapidly pivoted to explore the challenges of election administration in the early phases of the COVID-19 pan-

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<sup>2</sup>We are indebted to Democracy Fund for supporting this survey project since its inception in 2018. All conclusions in this article are the responsibility of the authors and should not be attributed to Democracy Fund.

demic. 2020 expanded the voter-centric battery to explore perspectives on improving turnout and supporting more inclusion in election administration efforts. In 2022, new items were developed to try a) better reflect the choices administrators face between what they have to do (“performance”) and what they aspire to do (“importance”); to discern levels of threats and harassment that officials faced on the job; and c) support received by state legislatures and state associations.

In this paper, we compare responses over time across several key categories which, based on our past work and the work of other researchers, are key points of distinction and differentiation within the elections community. The first comparison is across *size of jurisdiction*. Size varies greatly across our sample, it tends to represent the degree to which an elections office has developed into a single purpose agency or bureau. Smaller jurisdictions include election administration with a broader set of record keeping and administrative functions. Second, we compare *elected and appointed* LEOs. Approximately half of LEOs are either elected or appointed to their position. The appointed positions in our data include both those that serve at-will and those that enjoy civil service protections. Elected LEOs tend to be from smaller jurisdictions, and may include clerks or officials that are independent of broader county government by virtue of their elected status, such as in non-home rule governments. Recent work has shown that appointed officials outperform elected officials on some measures of administration (Ferrer 2022). Third, for some policy questions we also examine differences in *reported party identification* by respondents. Notably here, a large proportion (approximately a third) chose not to share their party identification with us. Finally, we explore some election reform questions based on whether the state the respondent is from uses *universal vote by mail* or some hybrid use of vote by mail. Here we suspect that policy feedback informs levels of support or opposition for various policies.

## **2.1. Methods**

The surveys used different response modes over time, in part as we learned how to better improve our response rates, and as required when the COVID pandemic resulted in no or limited in person staffing in many offices in 2020. The 2018 survey began as an online survey distributed LEOs after building an email list of 3000 of-

ficials (collected after sampling). Approximately half of the responses were collected online. Non-responding LEOs were then sent a paper survey via mail, making up the remaining half of the survey (n=1071). In general we found that smaller jurisdictions were more likely to respond to paper surveys, while larger jurisdictions responded via online. In 2019 the LEOS was administered entirely by mail with a paper survey (n=876). Extra outreach was made via email to increase response rates among the larger jurisdictions based on lessons learned in the 2018 survey. Due to the rapidly shifting challenges of the early pandemic, the 2020 LEOS was administered entirely online (n=857). Finally, in 2022, we returned to the mixed-mode method that we felt worked best in 2018 and 2019—respondents were initially given the opportunity to respond online and a print followup was sent to respondents within two weeks (n=855). In all four surveys, the questionnaires were in the field in the middle of the summer to avoid the bulk of Primary Election activity, and well before the General Election.

A note about visualizations. The figures presented in our findings include the 95% confidence intervals. While these can be an approximation of significance in assessing differences in means, we caution the reader to remember that these are approximations. Proper tests for significant differences are not included or reported here with these initial findings. Some overlapping intervals can still be significant differences but require further analysis.

### *2.1.1. Sampling*

We have developed expertise in generating a comprehensive database of local election jurisdictions in the United States, starting with a jurisdiction list from the Election Assistance Commission's Election Administration and Voting Survey, supplemented and validated with additional lists from election officials in Wisconsin and Michigan. We used the EAVS and other sources to add the number of registered voters for each jurisdiction. The first version of our sample universe totaled 8,083 local election jurisdictions. This is 2,279 fewer than the 10,370 local jurisdictions reported by Kimball and Baybeck (2013) and 2,249 fewer than the 10,340 jurisdictions reported by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in its 2016 report (2016). GAO researchers confirmed that the discrepancy was a result of how we treated the jurisdictional unit



in Minnesota. In its research, the GAO was interested in the administrative unit that purchases and allocates election machines and technology, which in Minnesota is the sub-jurisdiction (township and municipality). Our survey is directed at the chief election officials, who are appointed at the county level in Minnesota. Our final list, with contact information and number of registered voters, totaled 7,903 jurisdictions. The reduction from 8,083 was a result of different ways that jurisdictional and sub-jurisdictional units are handled in the various databases. This process was updated each year with EAVS data and researchers updating information via web searches.

From our contact list of nearly 8,000 local election jurisdictions, we drew a sample of 3,000. We wanted our sample to be representative of LEOs and nationally representative of service provision to voters. In other words, we wanted sufficient coverage of LEOs serving a large and diverse American electorate. Our sampling approach uses the size of the jurisdiction to generate a sampling probability for inclusion in the sample. Larger jurisdictions have higher probabilities, and smaller less populous jurisdictions have lower probabilities. A purely random sample would overwhelmingly draw from states with many jurisdictions with lower total registered voters, namely Michigan, Texas, and Wisconsin. This approach assures that almost all jurisdictions above 15,000 or more registered voters are sampled, with smaller jurisdictions included based on size.

The final step for this approach is to then collect email and postal addresses for the 3,000 LEOs in our sample. Our research team combines web-scraping and manual searching to collect these for each survey year.

### *2.1.2. Weighting*

Because of the use of size-based probabilities for sampling, the final collected sample is then weighted to address the differences in responses across jurisdictions. While all larger jurisdictions are included in our sample, only a proportion of smaller jurisdictions are included. To address this, weights are assigned based on the the inverse of the probability of inclusion to match the population of LEOs. In other words, smaller jurisdictions are weighted more heavily than larger because these responses represent more units of analysis than the larger jurisdictions. In practice, the use of weighting

on mean responses increases the role of smaller jurisdictions overall. Thus for some questions, using size as a variable is needed to understand the underlying dynamics. See Lee and Gronke (2020) for more information on sampling and weighting used in the surveys.

### 3. Key Perspectives

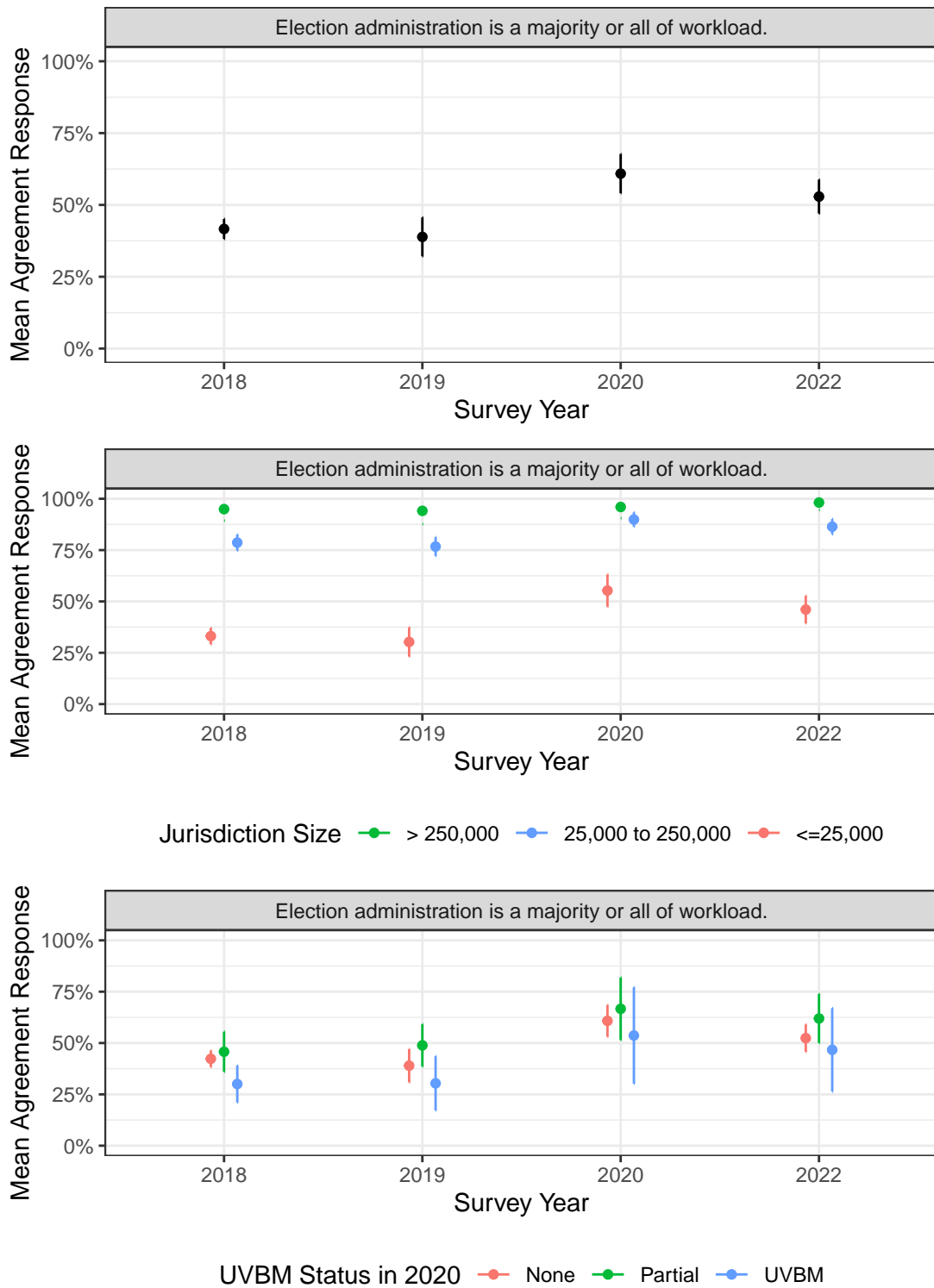
#### 3.1. *Workload and Job Satisfaction*

Across the three years of the survey we have asked LEOs to share the proportion of their workload that is dedicated to election administration. Many LEOs have diverse job duties beyond elections, notably among small jurisdictions. Figure 1 presents the proportion of LEOs that share election duties are a majority or all of their regular workload. Notably this number jumped in 2020, likely with the changing election landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic response. Most of this change is found in the smaller jurisdictions. Prior to 2020, less than 50% of small jurisdictions (<25,000 registered voters) reported elections being a majority or all of their workload, but in 2020 that number rises to above 50%.

Finally, we found an intriguing result with respect to universal vote by mail (UVBM) – a decline in reported workloads. This aligns with anecdotal comments we have heard from officials over the past two decades: the switch to UVBM means they no longer have to run “three elections at once” (early in-person, Election Day, and by-mail). We are cautious about generalizing from these results, however. The set of states that fit into the UVBM category shifted dramatically in 2020, which means that the responses in 2018 include a small number of fully vote by mail states, whereas the 2020 responses includes those that went full vote by mail in response to COVID.

We feel much more confident in the finding that *LEO workload has increased over the past four years*, as revealed by the responses from the medium-sized and small jurisdictions. This conforms to the comments we have heard in gatherings, convenings, in the in-depth interviews we conducted in 2020, and in our analyses of open-ended responses.

If workload is increasing, does this mean that the job of LEO is less satisfying and



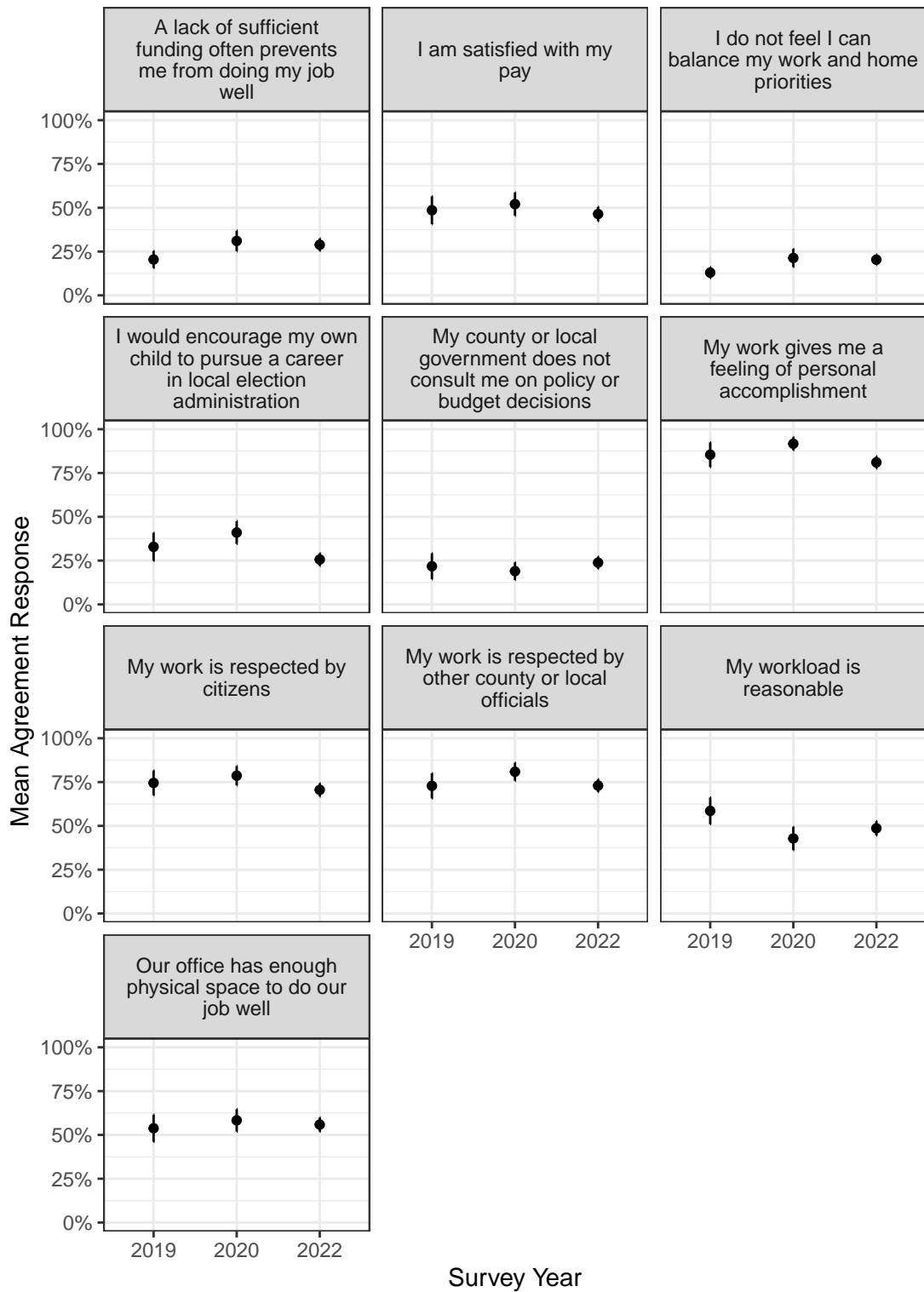
**Figure 1.** Change in workload across 2018-2022: Overall, by jurisdiction size (Registered Voters), and universal vote by mail status in 2020. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

rewarding than in the past? There is sometimes an irresistible tendency to romanticize the past as a less simpler, less complicated era, particularly in politics and elections in the United States. There is no doubt that the political environment in this country has become more polarized. elections have become more competitive, and post-election periods have become more litigious (Hasen 2012). However, much as local officials may have a tongue in cheek dream for “high turnout, wide margins,” this is the new normal in American politics, and from some perspectives, competition is a good thing (as long as losing candidates are willing to accept their losses).

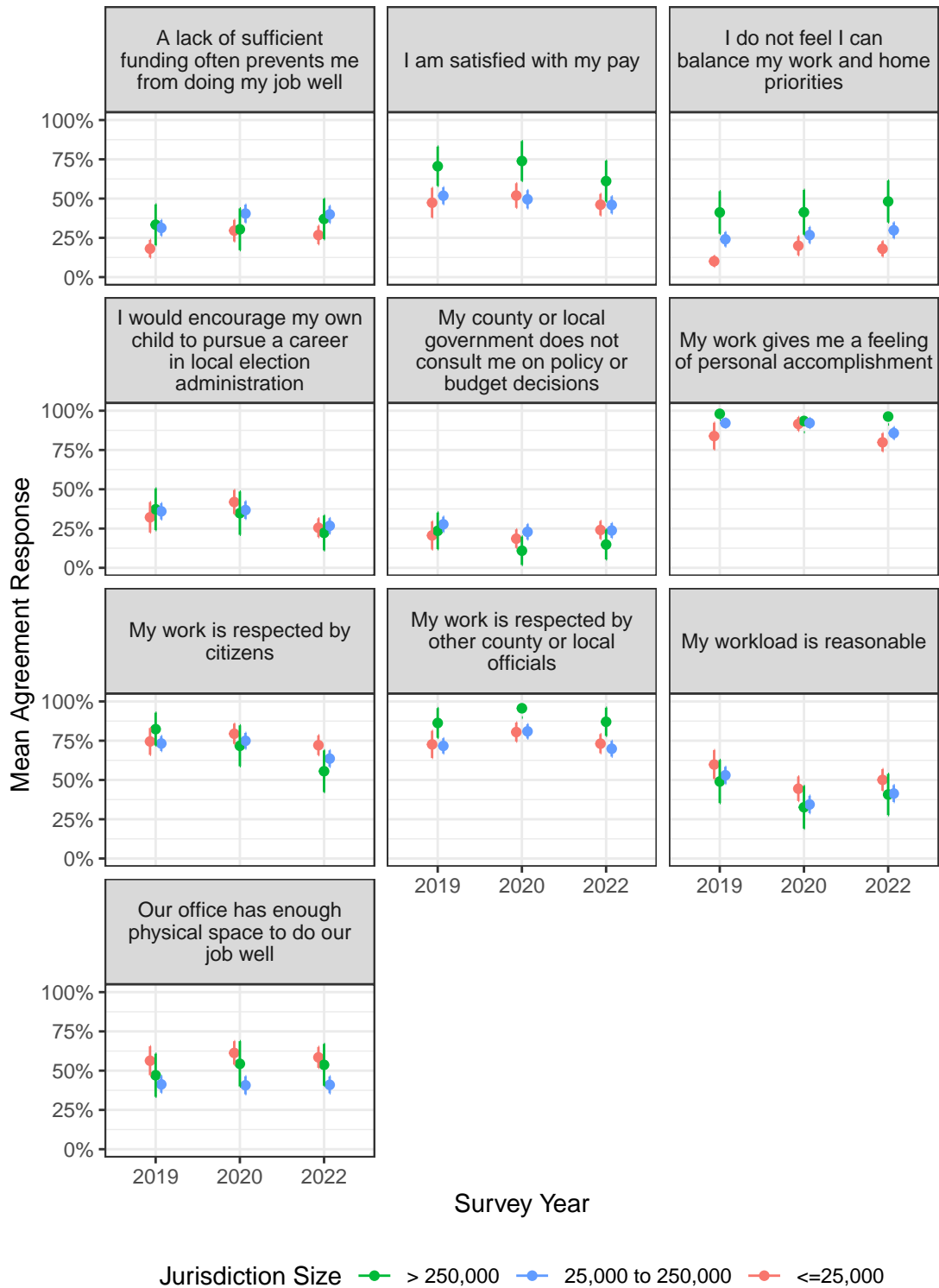
While these political changes have been underway for at least two decades, we did want to track job satisfaction among LEOs, and attempt to understand whether different segments of this population is more or less likely to report a positive and rewarding work environment. Starting in 2019 the LEOS included a battery of job satisfaction items derived from Clark 2010. These items were adapted to include some elections and local government specific questions. Figure 2 shares the overall changes in agreement with each statement in 2019, 2020, and 2022 for these items.

We were struck in 2020 at the high levels of satisfaction that LEOs reported in their work environment, even with pressures of inadequate funding and challenges of vertical relations with counties and state legislatures (Gronke et al. 2021). Over the three year period, we find increasing pressures on LEOs. They are more likely to report that funding, work-life balance, and workload overall are problematic. Other measures are more stable over time. We included in this battery a question about interest in running for higher office - LEOs are either holding their cards tight, or are not interested in higher office. Two items that we believe are important for job satisfaction are respect from citizens and other local government officials. These are both reported to be high with all LEOs sharing agreement with these items.

The size of the jurisdiction appears to have a small or no effect on responses across most items as shown in Figure 3. Some exceptions include satisfaction with pay, the largest jurisdictions are more satisfied with their pay, are more likely to say that their work is respected by others, but at the same time report greater difficulties in maintaining a work/life balance. We don't want to focus too much only on those items that show some differences, and hope to pursue some of the nuances and differences



**Figure 2.** Change in job satisfaction across 2019-2022. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



**Figure 3.** Change in job satisfaction across 2019-2022, by jurisdiction size (registered voters). Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

in future work.

### **3.2. *Voter-Centric Attitudes***

One of the original motivations for our survey was to examine the development of what the 2014 report of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration described as a “customer service” orientation for election administration (Presidential Commission on Election Administration 2014). According to the authors of the report, this orientation would mean that LEOs should work to improve the voter experience, making registration easier, inform and educate voters, work to reduce voting lines, and collect data and information that help them improve their services in the future.

We developed a battery of items that we call a “voter-centered” or “voter-centric” approach to election administration, reflecting many of the aspects of the PCEA report and some additional administrative values. They ask about different actions that are more service oriented in nature, versus simply transactional. For example, we ask about their level of agreement with the statement, “I enjoy educating citizens about voting rules and procedures.” Figure 4 shares the levels of agreement with each of these statements across the three years. Note one of these items is reversed in sentiment. The statement, “The primary responsibility of local election officials is to conduct the election not worry about voter education or voter satisfaction” is constructed to elicit a measure of disagreement but is presented here on a common agreement scale.

Overall, *LEOs broadly endorse voter-centric election administration*, as shown in the first two plots of Figures 4 and 5. There is a general pattern in 2019 of lower values, which we assume is a bias of being asked about elections in a odd-numbered year with no Federal elections. There is little difference between medium and larger jurisdictions in their responses to these items, but LEOs in smaller jurisdictions do consistently show lower levels of agreement with these items.

In 2019 the survey added two new voter-centric items that ask about turnout and inclusion in voter engagement efforts. We recognize that most of the drivers of turnout are beyond the control of an individual LEO; nonetheless, we were interested in seeing how many LEOs were willing to embrace the notion that turnout *was* something they should be concerned with, even if they are not empowered to move the needle in major

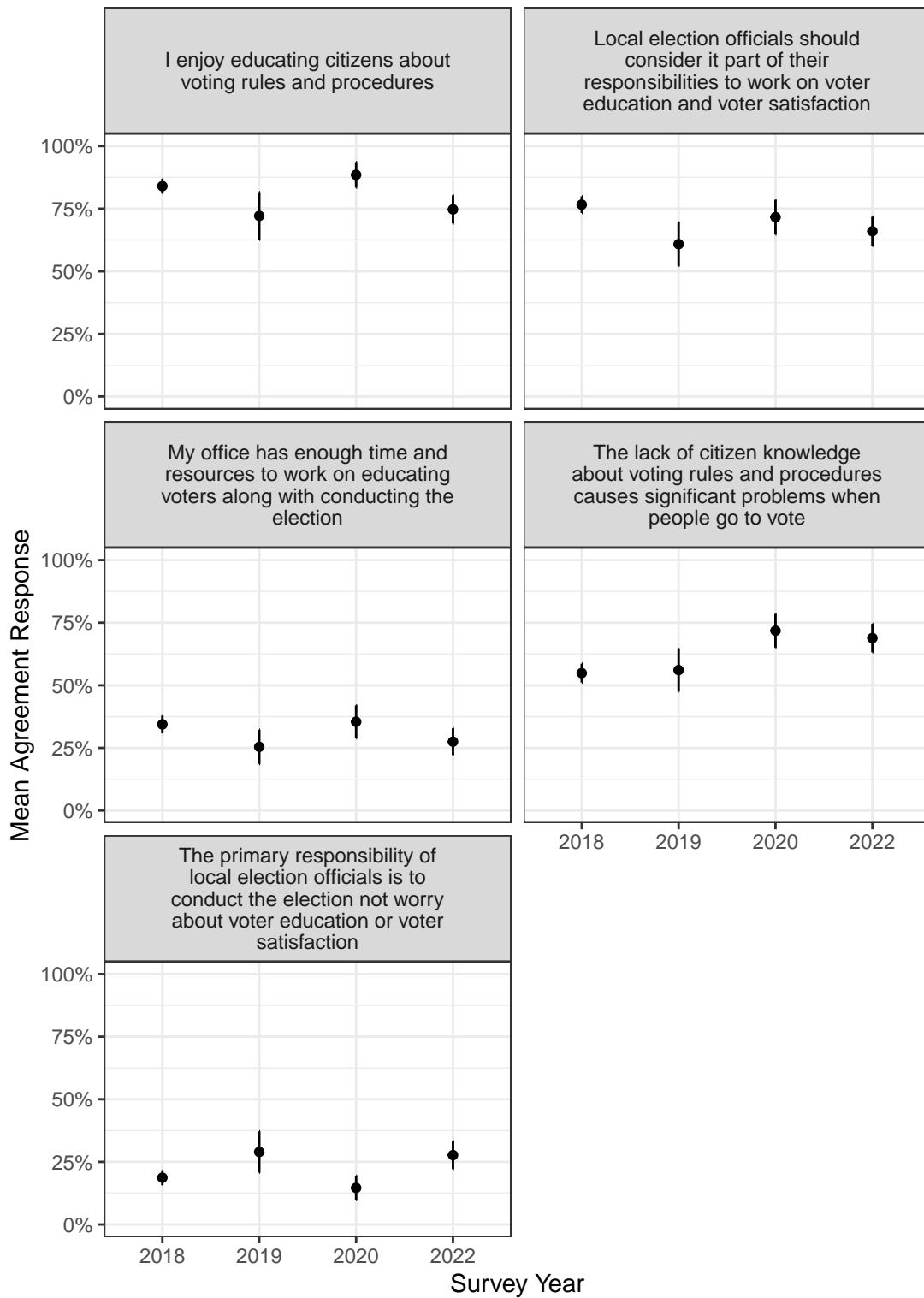
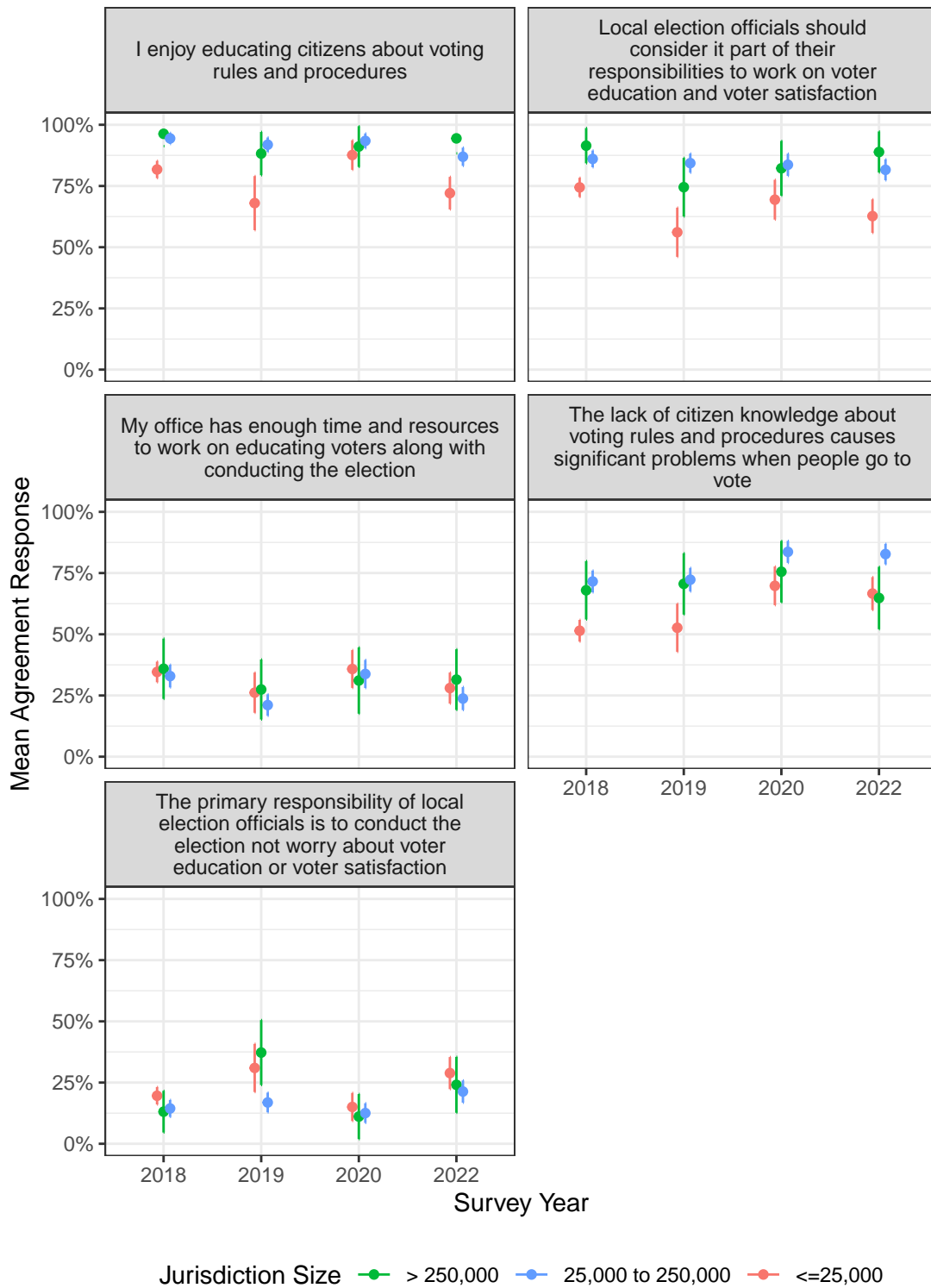


Figure 4. Voter-centric items across 2018-2022. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.





**Figure 5.** Voter-centric items across 2018-2022, by jurisdiction size (registered voters). Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

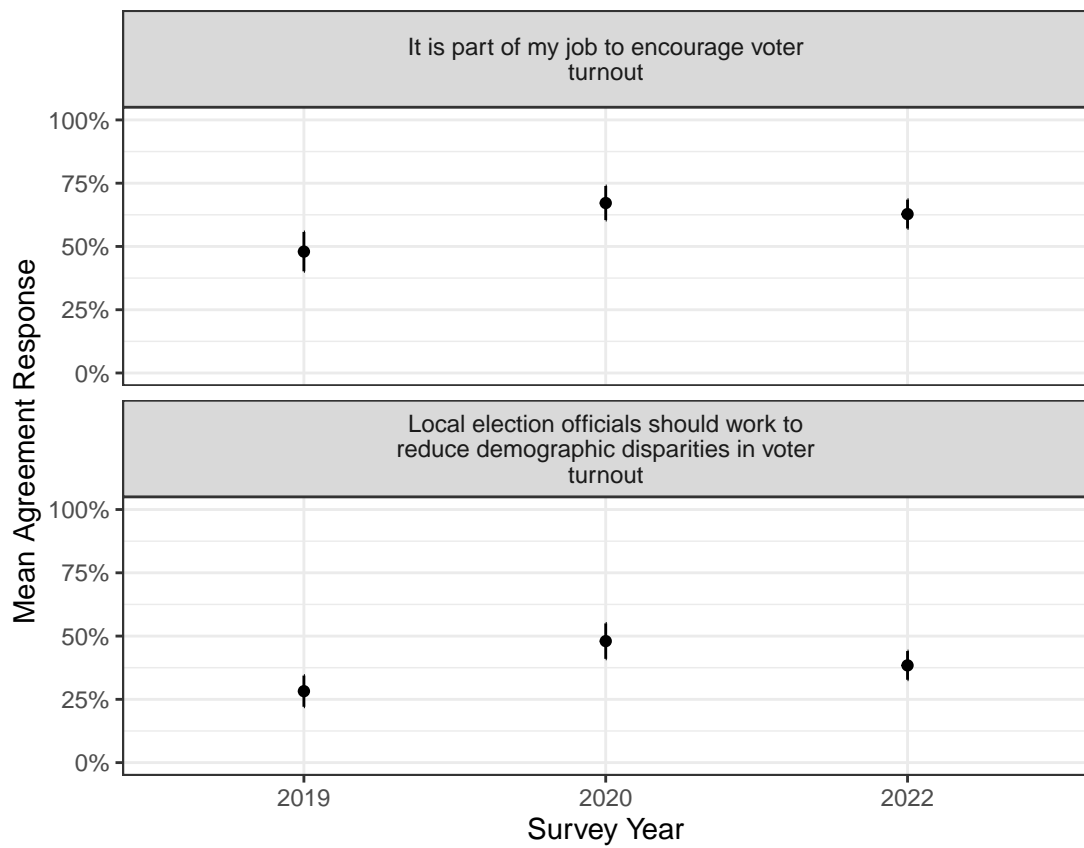
ways. The responses in 2019 and 2020 are reported in Figure 6. We are heartened to see that a majority of LEOs in each year did believe that encouraging turnout was part of their job, and we are not surprised to see a lower proportion endorsing the more difficult (and potentially politicized) idea that reducing demographic disparities in turnout was part of their job.

Finally, we compared the voter-centric responses in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2022 by elective vs. appointive status and by reported partisanship. We found few differences across these categories, except that LEOs who reported being Democrats were somewhat more likely to endorse the statement that reducing demographic disparities in turnout was part of their job. We have not reported these results in this paper, but they are available from the authors.

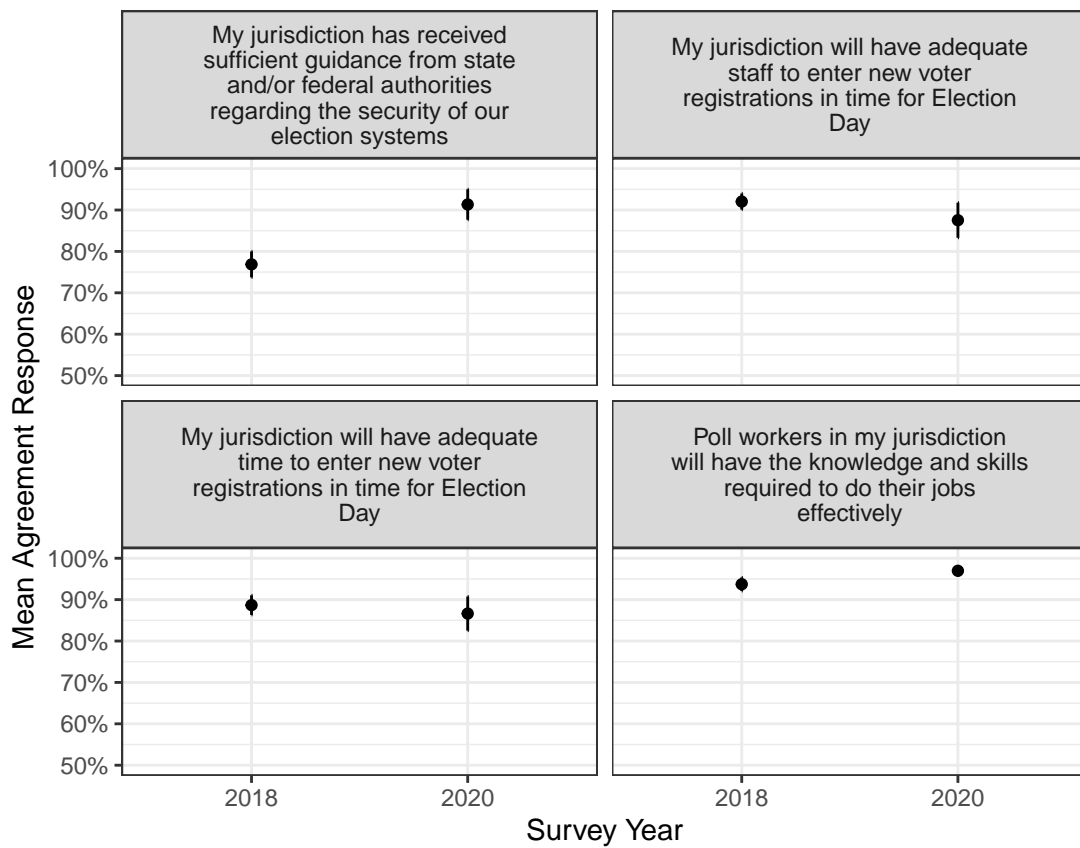
### **3.3. *Preparation for Elections***

At the core of the role of election administrator is administering the election, an obvious statement, except that, as we have already described, running an election engages innumerable distinct tasks, and not all are as easy to accomplish as others. Even in the mid-aughts, LEO surveys conducted by the CRS included questions that asked about a few key metrics of preparedness dealing with time, staff, and resources for handling registrations, obtaining and preparing polling places, and obtaining poll workers. (Fischer 2008) We repeated some of the CRS items in our surveys that have been administered since 2018, and other items were developed in response to the new requirements placed on officials, notably cybersecurity and early and by-mail voting.

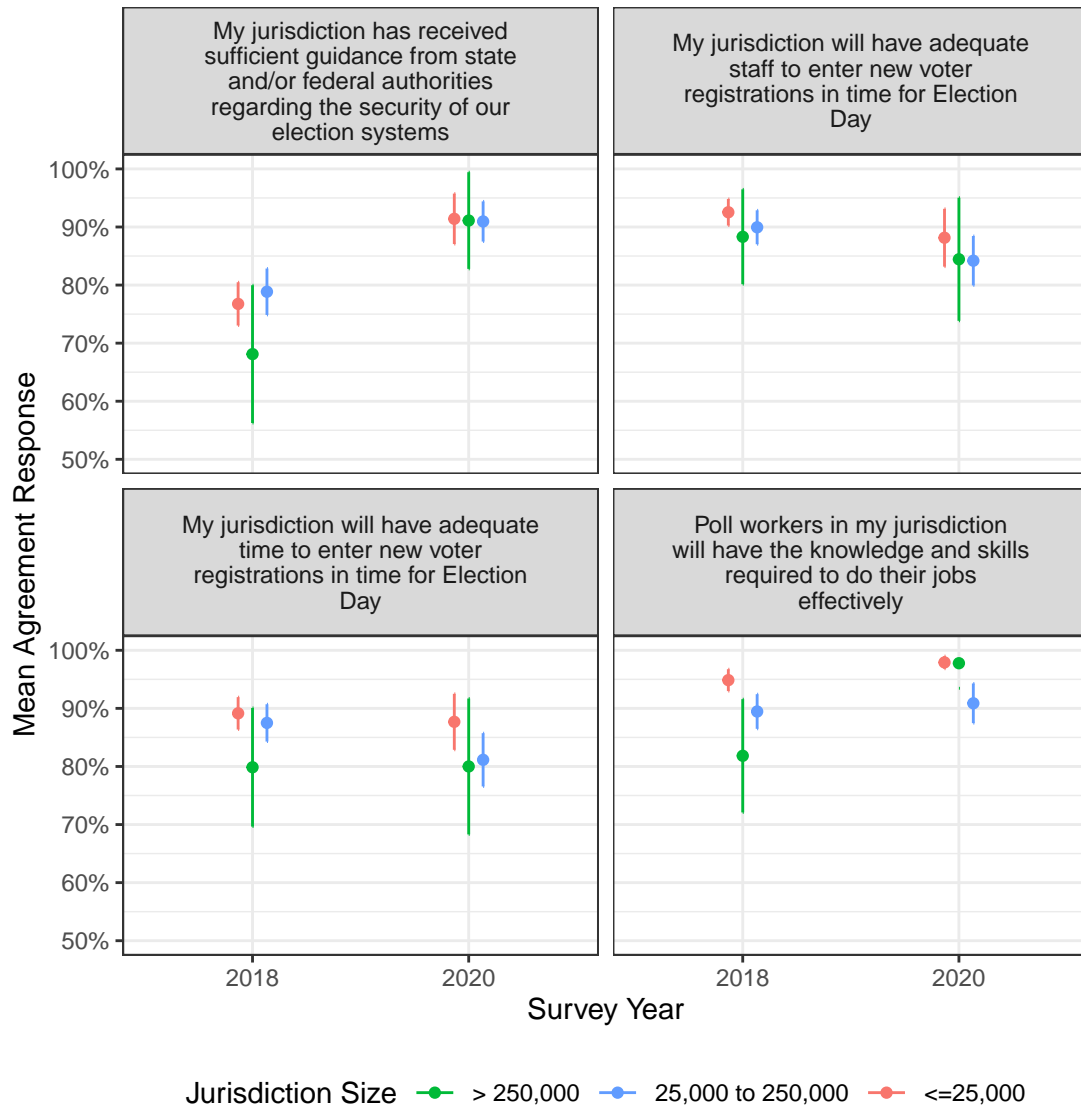
Figures 7 and 8 report on four of the preparedness items asked in 2018 and 2020: if LEOs thought they had sufficient guidance on cybersecurity, would have adequate staff to process new voter registrations, would have adequate time to process new voter registrations, and if their poll workers are adequately skilled the agreement levels to these items. Election security improved with a jump in agreement from 2018 to 2020. Poll workers are generally rated very well. There are some concerns about staff and time for registration, but these may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020 LEOS year.



**Figure 6.** Voter-centric items relating to voter turnout, 2019-2022, by jurisdiction size (registered voters). Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



**Figure 7.** Election preparedness items from 2018-2020. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



**Figure 8.** Election preparedness items from 2018-2020, by jurisdiction size (registered voters). Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

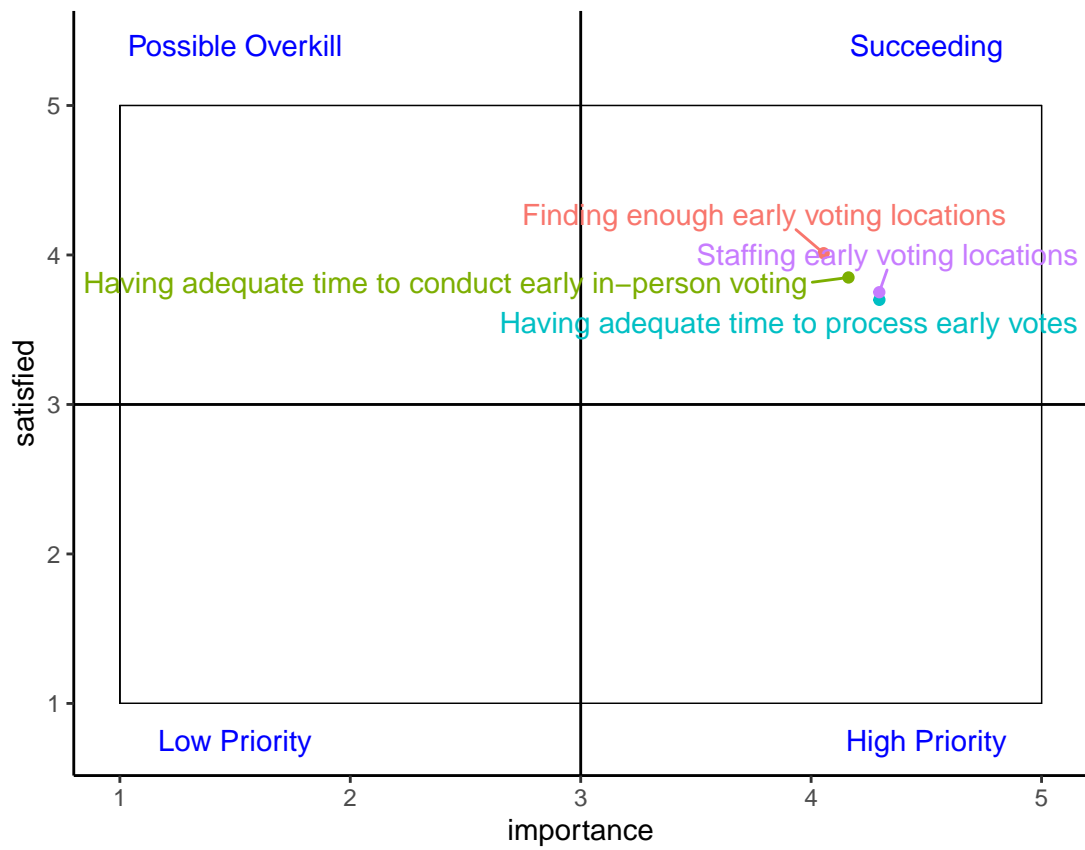
Size of jurisdiction does not appear to have a significant effect on the responses to the preparedness items. In 2020 there is some slight less agreement regarding the poll worker question for medium sized jurisdictions. The confidence intervals for the large jurisdictions suggest a fair amount of variability in the responses to these items, suggesting diverse experiences within this group of LEOs.

For the 2022 survey, we removed these more direct preparedness items with a pair of questions that assess *importance and satisfaction* with key requirements to administer elections. These were admittedly an experiment, an attempt to try to draw out nuances and distinctions from a set of administrators that had in the past told us they could do everything, even if undersupplied with personnel and resources, and faced with untenable timelines and extraordinary demands. Our hope was that by prying apart “importance” of a goal from “satisfaction” with past performance, we could amplify the voices of local elections officials to help identify and prioritize key needs.

We are still at an early stage in analyzing these responses, but the overall pattern for early voting (Figure 9) are underwhelming. While there is some variations across the dimensions of “importance” and “satisfaction” that may be meaningful – it remains the case the LEOs are telling us that everything is important and that everything is a high priority. There are surveyresponse methods to force rank ordering of goals and priorities that we may need to use in future surveys. We intend to pursue further analysis of the “importance/performance” items that were used at other points in the survey to help guide further efforts in this area.

### **3.4. Confidence in Elections**

Finally, the survey included a version of the Cooperative Election Study election confidence items in 2018, 2020 and 2022. In 2018, the LEOS did not match the scale used in the CES, using an agreement scale versus the confidence scale presented in 2020. For this analysis we have mapped over strongly agree and somewhat agree to very confident and somewhat confident. Therefore we are careful in making year-to-year comparisons as show in Figure 10. Increases between the two years may be a feature of the scale changing from agreement to confidence. Of more interest is the variance within each year across size (Figure 11) and party identification (Figure 12). Smaller jurisdictions



**Figure 9.** Importance-Satisfaction: Early Voting.

report lower confidence in the national election compared to other jurisdictions. They are also less confident that voter lists will be secure.

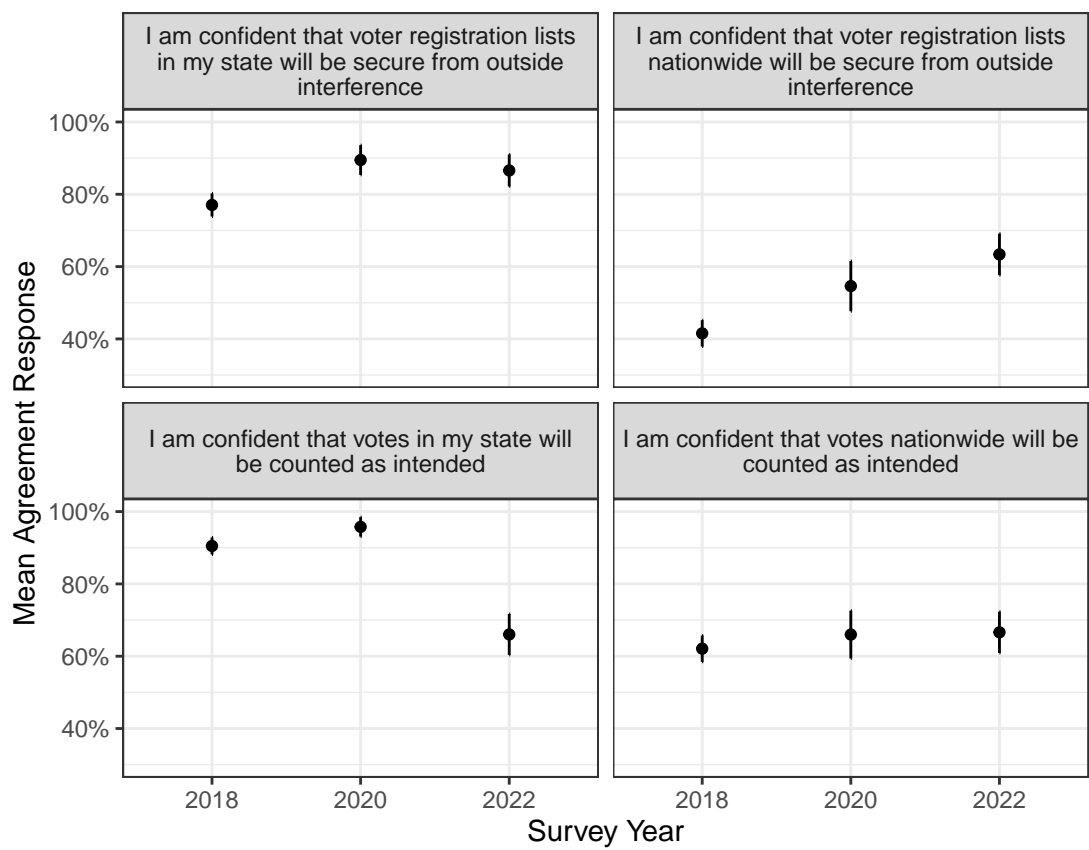
2022 presents a marked departure on the confidence in state level responses. This is an interesting change, in previous work we have found that confidence in state elections for a given LEO has been higher than confidence in elections nationwide. 2022 see the state level confidence drop to a similar level as nationwide confidence. On one hand this suggests that maybe enthusiasm in one's own state may have been overstated - it also suggests a sudden localization of national rhetoric around elections. Notably, the shift in these mean responses is likely driven by the partisan effects. Figure 12 shows the 2020 and 2022 partisan differences in confidence. Where responses were more or less indistinguishable in 2022 across party identification, it becomes markedly different in 2022 with Republicans and those not willing to share their party identification much lower than other respondents.

#### **4. Making Headway in the Storm**

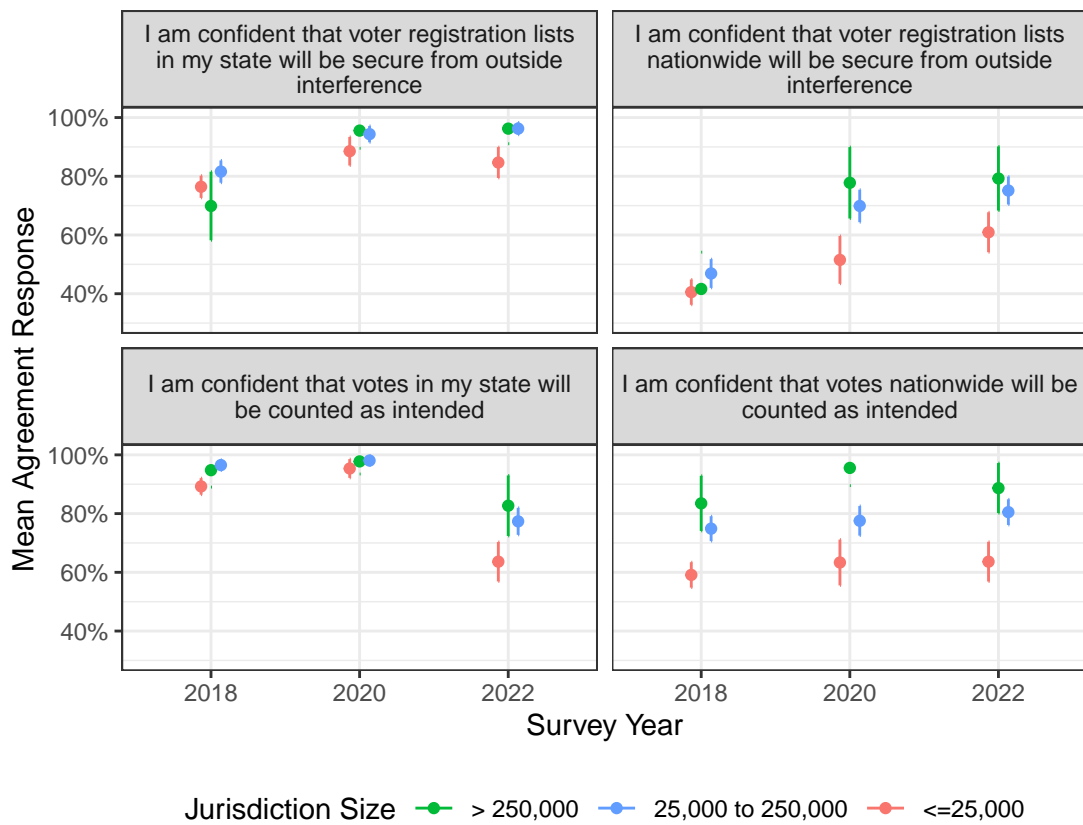
The past six years in election administration have been a dynamic period facing both long standing and emergent challenges. Despite these headwinds, LEOs report high job satisfaction and confidence in the administration of elections in the US. It appears that overall LEO workloads are growing, with their work increasingly focused on elections. This is also potentially creating new stresses as LEOs report challenges in maintaining work-life balance in their careers. Notably most LEOs now report that their workload is not reasonable, and that they face resource challenges to support voter education and engagement efforts. LEOs also report challenges with finding enough physical space for their offices and records.

Measures of preparedness for election administration are also stable or improving across our four measures. Guidance from federal and state authorities regarding security has been rated highly and increasing from 2018 to 2022. Poll workers are also rated well in our measures. Time and resources to manage voter registration is the only area that warrants some monitoring as we see stable responses, but with some variability in responses based on the size of the jurisdictions. When asked about their confidence in

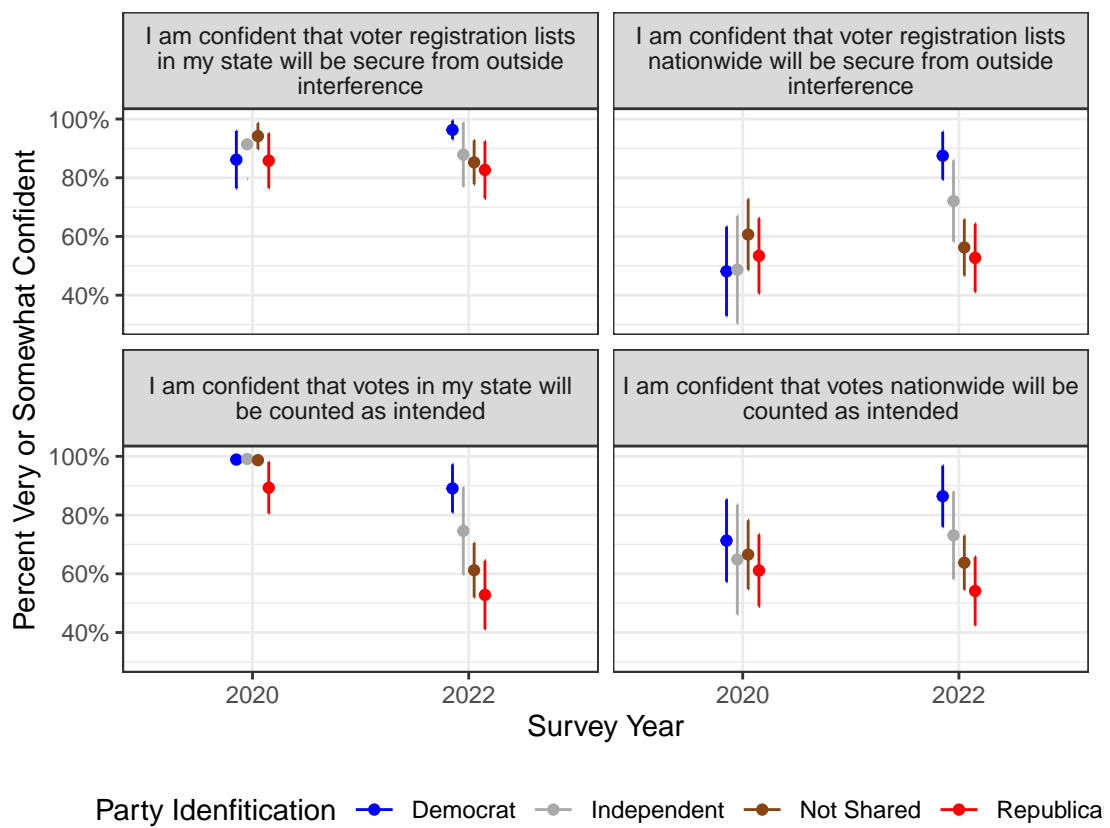




**Figure 10.** LEO confidence in election administration in 2018 to 2022. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



**Figure 11.** LEO confidence in election administration in 2018 to 2022, by jurisdiction size (registered voters). Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



**Figure 12.** LEO confidence in election administration in 2020 and 2022, by party identity. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

the administration of elections outside of their jurisdiction, LEOs somewhat follow the pattern of the general public. They are confident in their own state's administration, but share concerns about elections nationwide. This is a reminder that despite their positions in election administration, concerns over election legitimacy can seep into professional perspectives as well.

A another bright spot from these findings is a trend over four years of an increasingly voter-centric attitude. Across the voter-centric questions we asked, LEOs increasingly see their role as not just administering elections, but increasing turnout and supporting voters. When asked if encouraging voter turnout is a part of their job, 48% of LEOs agreed with this statement in 2019. In 2020, that proportion jumped to 67% of LEOs, though it declined again to 60% in 2022. Additionally, this perspective is consistent across party identification and across elected and appointed officials.

LEOs are in a unique position to exercise discretion in election administration and provide input to policy debates. These findings suggest rising personal challenges from a career and workload perspective. The 2022 Local Election Official Survey will follow up on these items, and explore the potential impacts of these pressures on LEOs and their decisions to stay or leave the profession. If pressures in the workplace grow, and are combined with external threats, turnover in election offices may create a challenge as tacit knowledge and election experience suffers with departures in the field.

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Finally, we are deeply appreciative of the time and effort local election officials take out of their busy days to complete this survey and to share their perspectives. Administering elections is a challenging task, and responding to our surveys hopefully adds to the national discussion of how to meet these challenges.

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