

SOUTHERN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2025 MEETING

## Shifting Dynamics of Local Election Administration: Findings Across Six Years of the Local Election Official Survey.

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### ABSTRACT

The Elections & Voting Information Center's Local Election Survey project was initiated in 2018 as a way to understand how local administrators responded to new administrative challenges that emerged after 2016. This paper provides an overview of the evolution of the LEO Survey project since that time, describing the substantive and methodological choices that the project has made to try to keep the survey results timely and policy relevant, while also providing over time metrics to monitor change in the election administration and policy space. In particular, we focus on two broad subject areas in this paper. NOW SUMMARIZE TOPICS. First, 2020-2024. Second, workload challenges as well as confidence of election officials in the overall outcomes of elections. We find that LEOs are reporting increased stresses that shift with the Presidential election cycle, and also show the impact of the rapid changes in election administration during the 2020 global pandemic.

The Elections & Voting Information Center's Local Election Survey project was initiated in 2018 as a way to understand how local administrators responded to new administrative challenges that emerged after 2016. What has developed in the six year period since is an ongoing survey enterprise, administered in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, and 2024, and which has provided regular measurements of performance and change in American elections through the lens of the local election official.<sup>1</sup> This paper provides a overview of the LEO Survey Project, and how it has evolved over time, with a special focus on change and adaptation since 2020. The 2020 election was a watershed moment in American elections, like in nearly all aspects of social, economic, and political life, and local election administrators were perhaps uniquely caught in the political turmoil of 2020 and its aftermath.

Since its inception, the LEO Survey project has had to wrestle with *diversity* and with *change* in elections and in the community of local election officials. The system of election administration in the United States is radically decentralized, with a complex

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<sup>1</sup>See Gronke and Kimball (2024) for a more detailed account of the intellectual background of the project and challenges in learning about local election officials.

set of diverse institutional arrangements that vary across and within states. The system has been described as a “crazy quilt” (Hale 2015, 5) with variations not just across regions, state, and jurisdictions, but also in who (or what) counts as the individual (or committee or board) that makes most of the administrative decisions about conducting local elections. The specific elections duties that a local election official or elections board oversees also vary, and elections duties may or may not be balanced with non-elections duties.

This has meant that identifying the “who” of local election administration is neither easy or obvious, and we discuss some of the ways we identified the “who” in the next section.

Identifying the “where” of local election administration is somewhat easier but also not always obvious. 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. The difference between these two totals is a result of a different treatment of Minnesota (as a county-level or sub-jurisdiction level state) but the persistence of different totals in discussions over election administration illustrates that it is not always clear what level of government shoulders the “main” burden of responsibility for administering elections.

In addition to this complexity, the past two decades have witnessed growing challenges for LEOs. In 2010, Robert Montjoy reflected on the decade rapid change in US election administration created by the policy responses to the 2000 election (Montjoy 2010). Demands on LEOs, and the increasing costs of administering elections were highlighted at the time. Today that “decade of change” is 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 public health and virology. They have had to establish procedures for evacuating their facilities and practice active shooter drills. They 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.

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 Elections & Voting Information Center Local Election Official Surveys in 2020, 2022, 2023, and 2024. 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.

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

### **1.1. *The Instrument: Balancing Repeated Measures and Responding to Emerging Issues***

Understanding both the make-up and perspectives of LEOs has been a focus of several waves of survey research over the past 20 years (Fischer and Coleman n.d.; Moynihan and Silva 2008; Kimball and Kropf 2006; Burden et al. n.d.) 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 Local Election Official Survey (LEOS) was first fielded in advance of the November elections.<sup>2</sup> The survey was initially conceived of as a response to foreign interference in the 2016 election, and was initially conceived of as a way to evaluate whether a cybersecurity protocols, advanced by the Federal Election Assistance

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<sup>2</sup>We are indebted to Democracy Fund for supporting this survey project since its inception in 2018. We also received support from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab in 2022 and the Elections Trust Initiative in 2023. All conclusions in this article are the responsibility of the authors and should not be attributed to Democracy Fund.

Commission (EAC) and a new federal agency, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) were being adequately communicated to, understood by, and implemented at the local level. At the same time, the primary researchers also realized that a decade had passed since there had been representative surveys of LEOs, leaving a knowledge gap about the community. In the interests of replication and tracking, a significant number of survey items in 2018 repeated items used in the CRS surveys of 2004, 2006, and 2008 (Fischer and Coleman 2011a, 2005, 2011b). New items were developed to reflect new aspects of election administration since 2008. Even though we were very much flying by the seat of our pants at times, the results of the 2018 survey resulted in the Stewards of Democracy report Adona et al. (2019), which put national surveys of local elections officials back on the research agenda of scholars.

One notable finding in the 2018 survey was less about change and more about stability. As we have reported since that point, the demographic profile of the “typical” LEO had remained largely unchanged since 2004, even in the face of all the other changes in election administration. In 2019, to try to understand in more detail this stability in the face of change, we developed new batteries of questions on career trajectories, training, and job satisfaction. Our funder at the time wanted to learn more about two registration reforms, online and automatic voter registration. It was after the 2019 survey that we began to try to unpack the gendered nature of local elections work (Manson et al. 2021; Manson, Adona, and Gronke 2020).

The 2020 survey once again pivoted to explore the challenges of election administration in the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. 2020 expanded the battery of questions on voter centered election administration to explore perspectives on improving turnout and supporting more inclusion. We expanded our section on career trajectories, adding questions about retirements and departures.

Much to our surprise—and to the surprise of many in the election administration and election science community – the takeaways from the 2020 election were captured neatly by Persily and Stewart (2021). The 2020 election was miraculous in that LEOs managed, in the face of a global pandemic and political turmoil, to administer the safest and most secure election in our history. It was tragic because of what happened in the weeks and months afterwards, as the “big lie” about the 2020 outcome continued



to be propagated and the integrity of our elections system was challenged.

This resulted in more changes in the 2022 survey. New items were added, tracking threat and harassment levels. We developed items 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 2023, an off year, additional questions were added to track staffing and replacements. Finally, in 2024, the project for the first time developed the instrument along with multiple academic partners. The 2024 survey added new items on budgeting and revenue options; public records requests; threats and harassment; and election skepticism perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

The LEO Survey Project has tried to respond to the need for a set of reliable measures to track change and evolution of the profession, which tends to recommend repeating the same items over time. The survey has also become an important vehicle to understand the impact of new policies and political events, which has led us to develop new questions that inevitably compete for space.

## **1.2. *The Sample (and Other Methods Challenges)***

Surveying local elections officials is neither simple nor straightforward. There is not comprehensive population list, and the lists that do exist may be in conflict. Contact information for LEOs has been increasingly put out of easy reach because of security concerns following the 2020 election. Finally, this is a relatively small, closely-knit community that is often skeptical of academic researchers.

Once the decision was made in 2018 to initiate the LEO Survey, we were faced with the question of *how* to actually do it. For local election officials, there is no YouGov panel that can easily be utilized. There is no comprehensive list of local election jurisdictions or of the individual who makes the key administrative decisions that identifies them as the “local election official.”<sup>4</sup> That meant we had to figure out

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<sup>3</sup>The 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022, and 2023 survey questionnaires, codebooks, crosstabs, and other reports can be found at [http://evic.reed.edu/leo\\_survey\\_project](http://evic.reed.edu/leo_survey_project).

<sup>4</sup>Early on in this project, in fact, we learned not to use the term “chief local election official” because “chief election official” is the term of art used to refer to the individual who oversees elections at the state level. See Hale, Montjoy, and Brown (2015) for more detail.

how to generate a population list.

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. From our contact list of nearly 8,000 local election jurisdictions, we draw samples between 3,000 and 3,300 offices. The larger samples are driven by over-sampling to capture majority minority jurisdictions. 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 – called “enterprise sampling” - 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 (Lee and Gronke 2024; Lee and Gronke 2020).

We have also used different response modes over time, using a mix of either fully online with email recruitment to a mixed mode of email and postal mail recruitment and both online and paper instruments. Sometimes, as in 2020, this was a matter of necessity, and in other years it was a matter of cost. In addition, we have to navigate around election “seasons”. For the 2020, 2022, and 2023 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. In 2024 we moved fielding to closer to the election focusing data collection on September and October.

<<<<<<< HEAD # Tracking Change Over Time: Illustrative Examples

With these caveats in place, we proceed to illustrate four kinds of change over time using the LEO Surveys. Primarily we focus here on the impact of the 2020 election, the consequences of which have been well-documented. How did this effect local elections

## LEO Confidence in the Integrity of the Vote Has Recovered to pre-2020 Levels

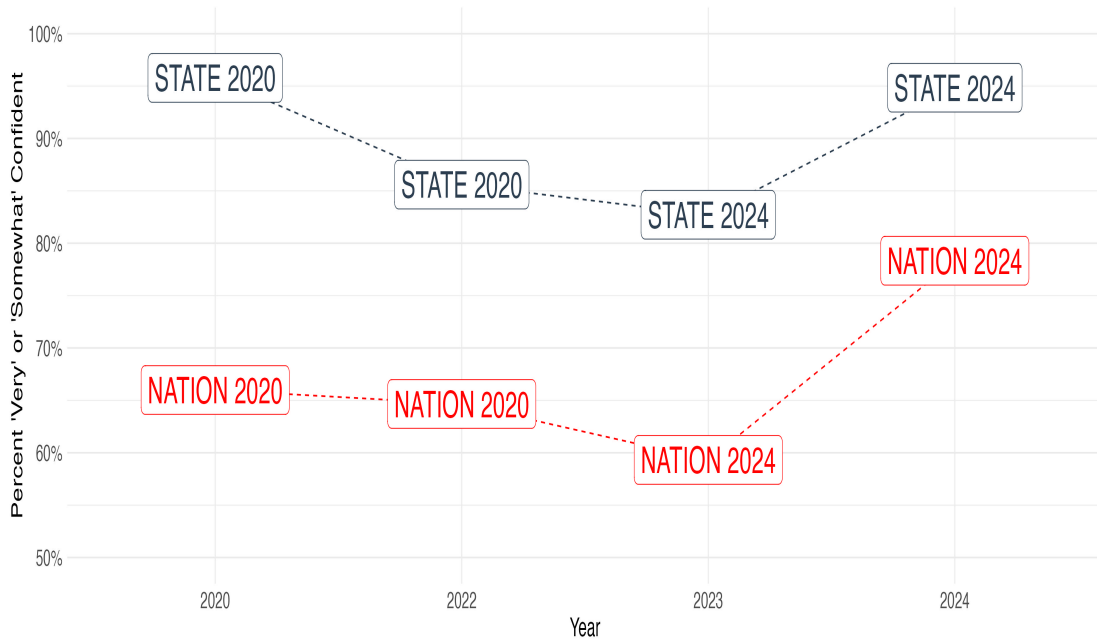


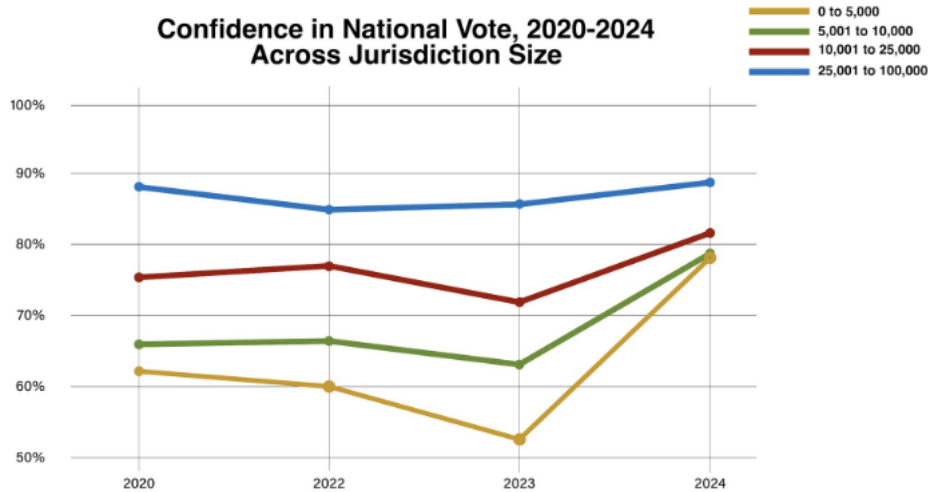
Figure 1. Voter Confidence Among LEOs, 2020-2024

officials? We illustrate four different patterns of change that we feel can be explored using the survey.

### 1.3. *Decline then Recovery: Confidence in State and National Count*

We start the investigation with a survey items that is a modified version of the voter confidence items that are often used as a measure of public belief in the integrity of the voting system. In earlier years of the LEOS survey, confidence was much higher than what was reported in mass public surveys, as one would expect of “elites” who are more informed about and administer elections (Manion et al. 2024). Still, the same pattern of lower confidence in the national vs. the state count seen in the mass public was evident among LEOs.

Figure 1 shows how the 2020 election impacted LEO voter confidence. It’s important to note what is being measured in this figure. In 2020, we asked LEOs in June of 2020 to evaluate the *upcoming* 2020 election. In the Spring 2022, we asked LEOs to *look back* to evaluate 2020. In Summer 2023, LEOs *looked forward* to evaluate the 2024 election. Finally, in Fall 2024, we asked about the 2024 election which was *underway*.



**Figure 2.** Voter Confidence by Jurisdiction Size

The tumult of the 2020 election closed the gap between LEOs and the public. Notably, confidence in the integrity of the national vote count and state vote count dropped after 2020, measured in 2022 as LEOs were looking back to evaluate the 2020 count. The decline continued in 2023 when the item was asked again, but phrased to look forward to the 2024 election. In the late summer of 2024, the LEOS found a rebound in confidence when asked about their view on the upcoming 2024 election.

Figure 2 shows this trend by the size of jurisdiction. The drop was concentrated in LEOs who worked in smaller jurisdictions. While the good news is that LEO confidence in the integrity of the election has largely returned to pre-2020 levels, there is a notable deviation in the trends across jurisdiction size.

These suspicions of a partisan pattern are confirmed when we examine confidence across partisanship. Since we began to ask the partisanship question – in the 2019 survey – over 30% of our sample chooses not to answer the partisanship question. The pattern of voter confidence, to the degree it reveals something about the LEOs who choose not to answer this question, indicates that they likely lean Republican.

We need to do more work to unpack the influences on changing voter confidence among LEOs. We are encouraged to see that the declines that occurred after 2020 has largely disappeared, but there remains substantial variation in national confidence across jurisdiction size and partisanship.

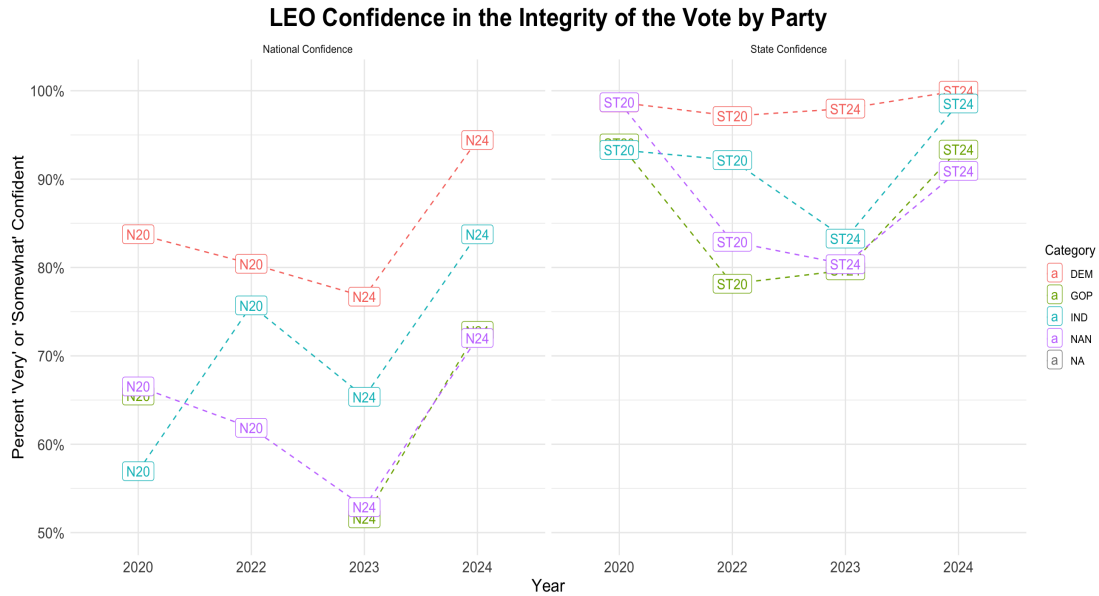


Figure 3. Voter Confidence by Party

#### 1.4. Decline and No Recovery: Job Satisfaction

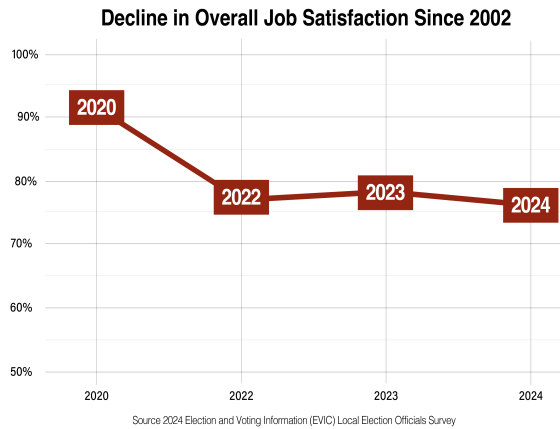
Another set of items that we have repeated regularly since 2020 and which we would expect to see some change in is job satisfaction. We’ve noted in past reports that LEOs display a “stiff upper lip” approach to their work, telling us that their jobs are stressful, with long hours and inadequate pay, yet still express overall high levels of satisfaction.

The picture here has changed since 2020, and not in a good way. As shown in Figure 4, job satisfaction declined by more than 10 percentage points from 2020 to 2022, and the subsequent years have shown no upward movement. We have not yet explored whether or not this decline is concentrated among small, medium-sized, or large jurisdictions, but we have been able to track some of the components of job satisfaction which we have repeated.

In Figure 5, we display these for 2020, 2022, and 2024. What is interesting here is that some components show a slight decline and recovery after 2020 – whether or not their work is respected by other local officials, and whether LEOs can “leave their problems at work” (to be fair, only 40% agree with this latter statement). Other measures, however, show a notable decline: overall pride, work/life balance, and “I would encourage my child to pursue a career in election administration,” which dropped in

# Overall Job Satisfaction

LEOs Report a Decline in Overall Job Satisfaction Since 2002



**Figure 4.** Decline in Overall Job Satisfaction

half, from 40% to 20%, from 2020 to 2024.

Job satisfaction is a complex and multifaceted concept. We hope to unpack these relationships in more detail, especially comparing trends across jurisdiction size.

## 1.5. *General Stability: Voter-Centered Election Administration*

Starting with the 2018 LEO Survey, we fielded a series of questions that we labeled “voter centric” / “voter centered” election administration. The intention of these questions were to capture a professional commitment on the part of LEOs to engage in outreach and educate voters, not simply “conduct the election” (Brown and Hale 2020). More controversially, perhaps, we asked whether or not LEOs felt that it was their responsibility to work to increase overall turnout, and, after 2020, whether they wanted to decrease racial and ethnic disparities in turnout.

These series, plotted in Figures 6 and 7, show some indication of declines in voter-centric attitudes after 2020 (every series shows a drop), but these declines are relatively small.

## LEOs Job Satisfaction Decline Since 2020: Work/Life Balance and Pride

Respect from Other Local Official Offices Remain Stable

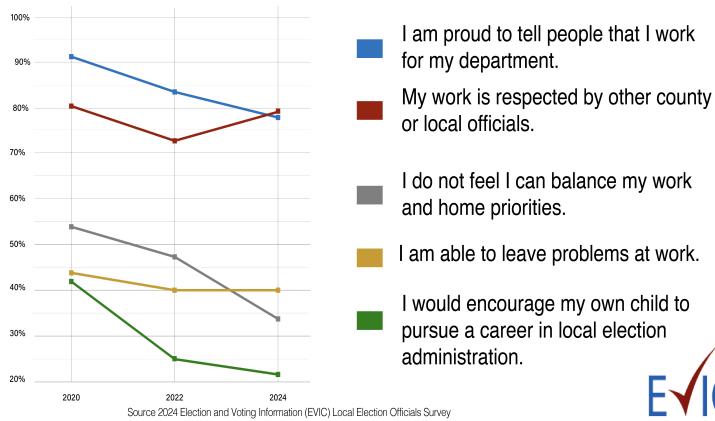


Figure 5. Components of Job Satisfaction

## Voter Centric Attitudes

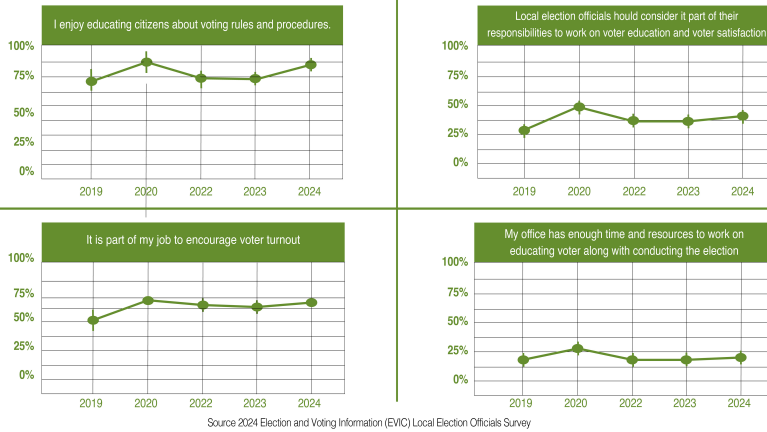


Figure 6. Voter Centric Attitudes, Part 1

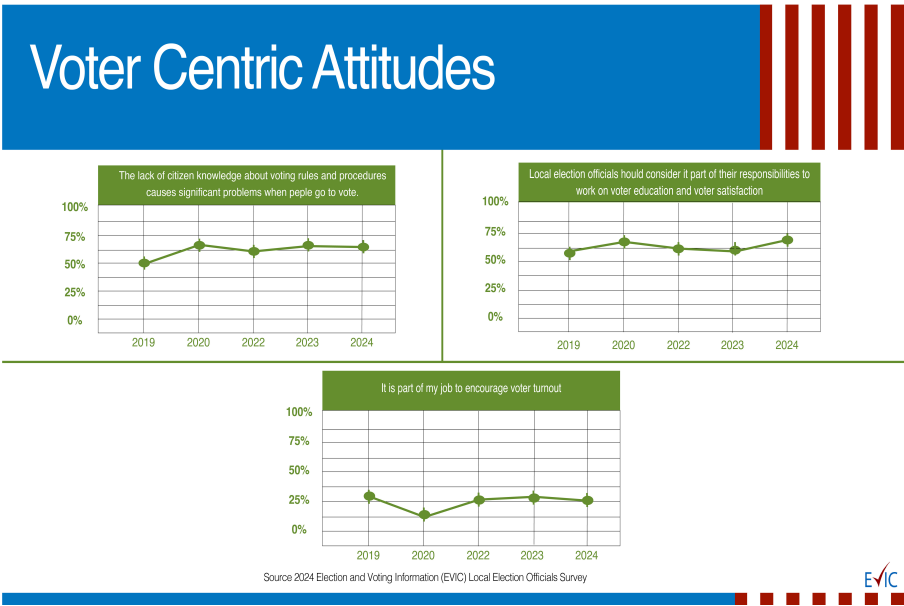


Figure 7. Voter Centric Attitudes Part 2

## 2. Conclusion

This is an exploratory effort to document change over time among the attitudes and beliefs of local election officials, using repeated items from the EVIC LEO Survey. We see significant movement in election confidence – mainly in evaluations of state election integrity – and this change is concentrated in small jurisdictions and among those LEOs who identify as Republican or who decline to state their affiliation. Encouragingly, most of this decline had disappeared by the 2024 election. In contrast, the 2020 experience immediately reduced LEOs expressed level of satisfaction with their jobs, and these lower levels of job satisfaction have remained. We also see some very significant drops in certain components of job satisfaction. Finally, in the area of voter centered election administration, we see some evidence of a post-2020 decline and recovery, but movements here are relatively modest.

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