

The Evolving Election Administration Landscape

Request for Proposals

Round 1 proposals are due July 22, 2022

Round 2 proposals are due August 12, 2022

Summary

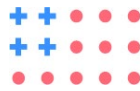
The MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL) seeks to make \$2 million in grants in the next three months to support research projects that illuminate how the evolving election administration landscape has changed in light of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, broadly considered. The ultimate goal is to help understand how these changes have affected convenience, security, and efficiency in the conduct of elections and to plant seeds for evidence-based approaches for improving election administration.

The Evolving Election Administration Landscape project will support projects that can be completed before August 31, 2023. Most projects will use the 2022 federal election as an opportunity to assess how recent changes to election laws and practices have affected election convenience, security, and efficiency. We also welcome proposals that explore persistent topics that may not have been extensively evaluated and/or scrutinized since 2020.

This program will consider proposals in the approximate range of \$50,000 to \$200,000. It is anticipated that the size of the proposed budgets will primarily be determined by the project's complexity and whether the project is focused on a single state or multiple states. There are two deadlines for the receipt of proposals. Proposals not chosen in the first round will be held over for consideration in the second.

Underscoring the ultimate goals of this program, project proposals will be evaluated, in part, on their plans to engage election administrators in planning and executing research. Final research reports will be required to address policy recommendations that would have bipartisan appeal.

The Evolving Election Administration Landscape project is supported by the Election Performance Project, an initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts.



Introduction

The 2020 election provided numerous challenges to the administration of elections in the United States. The beginning of the presidential primary season coincided with the first reported deaths from COVID-19. The resulting public health emergency confronted everyone involved in setting and implementing election policy—from governors to precinct poll workers—with fundamental decisions that would affect whether the primaries could be held as planned and ultimately whether the general election would be accessible to all. In the end, primaries were held, nominees were selected, and a record number of Americans voted in the 2020 general election.

Ensuring that all eligible Americans would have access to a safe and reliable method of voting was an enormous undertaking, and required every state to at least alter standard operating procedures, and for most states, to change laws, regulations, and practices substantially. For the first time in history, most Americans cast their ballots before Election Day.

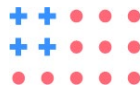
With these seismic shifts in election administration and in the spirit of continually improving election administration using an evidence-based approach, 2020 is a laboratory beyond compare.

This project seeks to use the present moment to lay an empirical foundation for the improvement of elections in the U.S. It is not blind to the challenges of conducting empirically focused research under the current circumstances, nor to the challenges of proposing empirically grounded paths to improvement. It does proceed with an assumption—or at least a maintained hypothesis—that there is an audience (even a hunger) for fact-based analysis of election administration and the potential for those paths to inform the evolution of law and professional practice in the coming years.

The project seeks to support research that illuminates how the evolving election administration landscape has changed in recent years. Most of these changes coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, broadly considered, but election administration was evolving even before then. It is especially interested in projects that focus on mail balloting, voter registration, polling places and voter experience, administrative capacity, and combating misinformation about election administration. It aims to support research that is grounded in the methods and theories of social science while simultaneously aiming to improve the practice of elections in the short- and medium terms.

This focus necessitates the exclusion of other topics and approaches that, while critical for a broader understanding of present-day election administration, are outside the scope of this project. For instance, it is not intended to support research into topics such as technical issues related to cybersecurity and adjacent topics such as campaign finance, election systems, and the Electoral Count Act. Nor is this project aimed at supporting fundamental research that does not have an immediate application to improving the practice of elections.

This project seeks to engage researchers who have a long track record in working in the fields of election administration and election science as well as those whose expertise has been focused on adjacent fields, but who wish to contribute to efforts to strengthen the practice of elections in the U.S. We anticipate that



most applications will come from college and university researchers, but we welcome applications from other non-profit research entities, as well.

About MEDSL

The MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL) was founded in 2017 to advance election science through the collection and dissemination of core data critical to the work of researchers, the conduct of its own research into the performance of American elections, the encouragement of election science research by academic and non-academic researchers throughout the country, and building relationships with election officials for the improvement of the practice of election administration. The Lab is committed to the improvement of scholarship and practice in election science through high-quality data gathering and analysis. It is committed to the highest standards of scientific integrity and non-partisanship.

MEDSL's website, electionlab.mit.edu, contains further information about the Lab's work. The website also contains information about its previous grants program, New Initiatives in Election Science, which distributed funds made available through a generous grant of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to 33 research teams, most of which were granted to junior scholars or Ph.D. students.

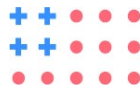
Statement of Work

MEDSL seeks to fund research through this initiative that addresses two types of topics: (1) processes of election administration that were the focus of rapid innovation during the 2020 election or attention from state legislatures since then and (2) long-standing topics of concern to election administration that have recently “flown under the radar” but may now be ripe for reconsideration.

The following is a list of specific research questions that illustrate the types of topics this project seeks to address. It is broken down into four broad themes or categories about which the project is especially interested in funding. This list is intended to suggest the types of topics that would be looked upon favorably, but is not exhaustive.

Mail balloting

1. How did states and localities deploy drop boxes in 2020? How many voters used them? What methods were used to ensure their security? How have changes to state laws since 2020 affected the use of drop boxes in 2022; how might they affect 2024?
2. How did states handle the problem of “curing” deficient applications for mail ballots and returned ballots? Which methods were the most effective in protecting access to the ballot box while ensuring the security of the voting process?
3. How do varying laws and practices related to processing mail ballots affect the speed and accuracy of election-result reporting?
4. How do varying deadlines for the request and return of mail ballots affect their level of use and rate of rejection?



Voter registration

1. How have changes to requirements on or elimination of same/election-day registration affected the volume of voter registration and the composition of the registered electorate?
2. What processes do states employ to ensure that out-of-date information is removed from voter rolls in compliance with the National Voter Registration Act, and which have been the most successful in cleaning those rolls?
3. What processes do states employ to verify that voter records are correct and do not contain missing or incorrect information?
4. What impact has the expansion of automatic voter registration had on the number and composition of registered voters, and the accuracy of those records and voter rolls?
5. How have changes induced by COVID-19 and legislation affected the ability of civil society groups to engage in voter registration drives and outreach? Have these changes had any measurable effects on the number of registrations and who is registered?
6. Are provisional ballots utilized as a process to register new voters post-Election Day? If so, how does this process vary across states/jurisdictions, and how are registration rates affected?

Polling places and voter experience

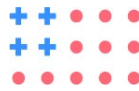
1. Has the closing and moving of in-person polling places (both Election Day and early in-person) had an effect on access to the polls and access to in-person voting?
2. What specific factors account for the apparent increase in wait times to vote in 2020 and how might those be mitigated in the future?
3. How have new election observation rules been implemented? Have they led to greater access to election observation? Has there been an increase in disruptions due to election observation?
4. Which processes did states and local election officials adopt to recruit and retain poll workers for the 2020 election and which continued into 2022? How has the diversity of the poll worker pool changed as a consequence?
5. How many states switched to paper ballots and/or updated their voting technology, and what was the impact on the in-person voting experience?

Institutional capacity

1. How has the “great resignation” affected recruiting of election personnel at all levels and the quality of election administration?
2. What is the status of efforts to audit elections, particularly, to expand the use of both risk-limiting and “forensic audits?”

Combatting misinformation and building trust

1. What strategies are state and local officials undertaking to combat misinformation about the electoral process? Do measures of success exist to help establish “best practices?”
2. How effective are post-election audits for building trust among the electorate?
3. Is it possible to develop techniques to measure the degree to which certain messages meant to assuage concern over the integrity of elections are more effective than others?



4. How accessible are state and local election information structures to disabled voters, and what are some best practices for information accessibility across different modes of communication?

Criteria for Selection

All research projects will be assessed on their relevance to the issues discussed in this RFP according to the following criteria:

1. *Responsiveness* to the goal of understanding the effects of changes caused by the 2020 election and its aftermath on the quality of elections in the U.S
2. *Rigor* in methodological approach
3. Prospect of providing *practical guidance* to the fields of election administration and election science

Proposals that are judged to meet the overall goals will be further assessed according to three specific evaluation criteria:

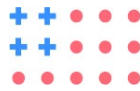
1. *Methodological approach.* Proposals will be evaluated in terms of the general approach to the question posed and the specific data to be gathered and methods to be deployed in analyzing the data. Because of the research time frame, it is anticipated that most projects will be dominated by quantitative data. However, projects that employ qualitative methods will be welcome. Proposals will also be required to describe quality control approaches, including fact/data checks and peer reviews where applicable.
2. *Work plan, time frame, and budget.* Proposals will be assessed according to whether the tasks delineated in the proposal are adequately described and can feasibly be carried out in the time frame proposed. Because the project focuses on the 2022 election, special attention will be paid to whether the research team can deploy research assets quickly enough to capture the relevant dynamics of the election.
3. *Institutional capacity and personnel.* Proposals will be assessed on the qualifications of key personnel and whether plans for supporting research team members are appropriately scaled.

Priority will be given to proposals that represent partnerships among researchers and election officials.

Budgets will be assessed according to their appropriateness given the research proposed. Specific allowable expenditures would include the following if clearly justified by the research proposal:

1. Release time and/or summer salary for principal researchers
2. Graduate research assistance
3. Travel to conduct interviews, gather data, etc.
4. Travel to present research at scholarly conferences

At least one member of each research team will be expected to attend a research workshop of grantees in January 2023, on the day preceding the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association at St. Pete Beach, Florida. All proposals will be expected to budget for this item.



Overhead payments will be limited to 10% of direct costs.

Proposal Guidelines

MEDSL plans to grant \$2 million to projects identified through this RFP. The total number of projects will depend on the number of proposals and the budgets of the selected projects. We anticipate that grants selected will range in size from \$50,000 to \$200,000, but MEDSL may select projects with budgets below or above these levels.

Application Process

Proposals should be no more than 10 pages (single-spaced, 12-point type, 1-inch margins). Each proposal should include the following:

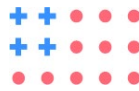
- A brief abstract of no more than 150 words of the work being proposed;
- A statement of research questions to be addressed, including a discussion of why these questions are important and a discussion of any previous research aimed at answering these questions;
- A description of the approach;
- A work plan describing the tasks to be conducted and the timeline for completing them;
- A staffing plan indicating the key staff who will perform each task. The staffing plan should include a *short* bio of each principal staff member;
- A statement of how the research team intends to engage with election officials and/or other practitioners, if not explicitly addressed in the description of the research; and
- A budget with separate line items for (1) labor costs, (2) fringe benefit costs, (3) travel, (4) other direct costs, and (5) indirect costs. (Overhead payments will be limited to 10% of direct costs.)

A cover page for the proposal should include the name and contact information for a single point of contact about the proposal. The cover page should also include the total amount of funding being requested.

Proposals should be explicit about the proposed grant period. Proposed grant periods may begin as early as August 15, 2022, for projects that require work in the summer to prepare for research in the fall. It is anticipated that grant periods will begin no later than September 1, 2022. Grant periods must end before or on August 31, 2023. *No-cost extensions will not be granted.*

Work Product and Dissemination of Results

This project aimed to support research that will help to improve the practice of election administration in the U.S. and to encourage the dissemination of that research. The dissemination of the research results will not only provide information that will be of use to foster data-driven improvements, but it will also help contribute to the foundation of knowledge on which future research will be conducted. With these aims in mind, research projects chosen for support will be expected to participate in the collective research

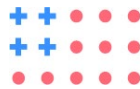


effort this project is supporting and to contribute, at a minimum, publications aimed at both academic and general audiences. The following is a list of research/publication expectations among the research teams chosen.

1. *December webinar.* Following the 2022 election, MEDSL will host a public webinar in which research teams will share what they have learned thus far that contributes to a deeper understanding of how the 2022 election was conducted. These brief contributions to the discussion will be varied, depending on the nature of the research project, and preliminary, but will be intended to inform the election administration community and the attentive public about how election-science research throws light on emerging topics of election administration.
2. *Post-election blog post.* In conjunction with the December webinar, each research team will produce a brief (approximately 500-word) blog post that addresses issues associated with the 2022 election in light of their emerging research.
3. *January 2023 workshop.* MEDSL will host a work-in-progress workshop of research teams on the site of the 2023 Southern Political Science Association annual meeting. This will be a private, invitation-only workshop that will allow research teams to share preliminary results and receive preliminary feedback from the larger research community.
4. *Academic conferences.* Each research team will be expected to propose at least one paper to a general academic conference to report on the results of the team's research.
5. *ESRA conference.* Each research team will be expected to propose a paper or poster presentation for the 2023 Election Science, Research, and Administration Conference.
6. *Final technical report.* A final technical report will be due to MEDSL by August 31, 2023, describing the research conducted and conclusions reached.
7. *Open-source data.* Following completion of the project, each research team will provide MEDSL with a copy of any datasets created in the course of the research, for publication on the Harvard Dataverse. Teams may request that datasets be embargoed for up to a year.

Submission Instructions

1. While not required, consideration of grants will be facilitated through the submission of information about the intended research, via the project's website, which provides the following information, as soon as possible:
 - a) Principal investigator and affiliated institution
 - b) Anticipated other partners
 - c) Proposed research topic
 - d) Anticipated funding request
2. Proposals shall be uploaded to the project website at the following URL:
<https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/learning-from-elections/apply>
3. Proposals must follow the parameters described above in the "Application Process" section. Proposals should *not* include additional material beyond what is described in that section. Project teams will be contacted if further elaboration is required. Proposals that do not meet the form and length parameters will be returned for revision.



Questions about Process and Suitability of Proposed Topic

Any questions about the grant program may be directed to medsl-grants@mit.edu. With very few exceptions, answers will be posted for public inspection on the FAQ page of the grant program website: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/learning-from-elections>

Queries about Research Partners

Research groups looking to partner with other research organizations on a topic or seeking practitioners as partners should contact MEDSL through medsl-grants@mit.edu.