

Civic Roundtable:

Retaining Election Officials in a Time of Uncertainty

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Summary of Work to Date

We aim to explore how online peer communities play in building capacity within governmental units, reducing burnout, and improving performance, specifically in the context of local election officials (LEOs). With this central research contribution in mind, we connect existing themes in academic and advocacy literature that include election funding, election administration, the role of affirmation, and the current status of local LEO morale and conditions.

Project goals:

- Assess the value of inter- and intra-state communities of practice to state and local election officials throughout the election cycle
- Map election officials' capacity and resource needs at the state and local level
- Measure the impact that the Roundtable platform has on election administration and job satisfaction outcomes

Preliminary findings:

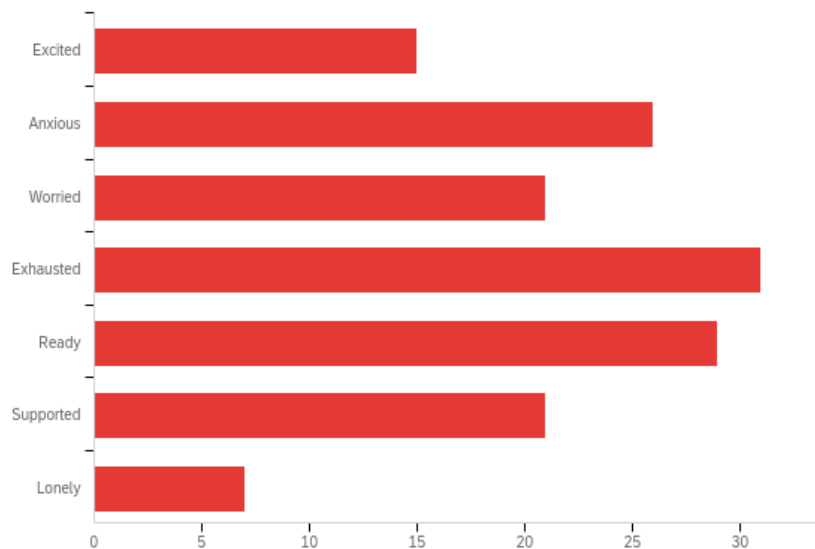
Our initial findings are limited to the descriptive (rather than causal) questions that our project will attempt to answer. These preliminary findings, at a high level, are that election administrators reported strong negative feelings in the immediate period prior to the November election, but at the same time felt supported by others. These feelings of support may stem from the numerous personal interactions they had with other election officials that involved information-sharing and social support, such as those they had on the Roundtable platform.

Our first set of findings arise from the pre-election survey of local election officials that we launched in three states (Rhode Island, Missouri, and Virginia) before the election. Overall, respondents reported being somewhat satisfied with their jobs. Respondents reported an average level of job satisfaction of 3.88 on a 1 (least satisfied) to 5 (most satisfied) scale.

This middling level of satisfaction was accompanied by reports that election officials frequently experienced physical and mental exhaustion. A majority of respondents reported experiencing these types of exhaustion at work either "Always" or "Often." In fact, the most commonly reported feeling by election officials, as shown in the figure below, was "exhausted." In addition, more than a third of respondents reported that their work frustrated them to a "high" or

“very high” degree.

Which of these feelings apply to you when you think of the upcoming election?

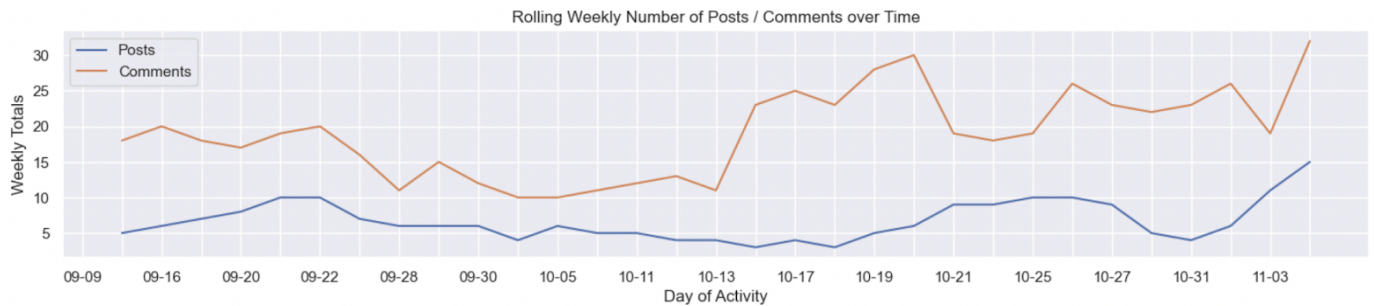


Despite these rather negative feelings among local election officials, respondents to our survey also reported feeling supported: in addition to negative feelings of exhaustion and anxiety, our respondents reported feeling both “ready” and “supported.” A majority of respondents also reported that they had received advice and/or help regarding a work-related question or issue in the last month.

Findings from our one-on-one interviews conducted so far corroborate these survey-based findings. Interviewees have consistently expressed the usefulness of communities of practice for information sharing and support. One insight from these interviews is that they feel there is a major public misconception that the work they do is time-limited, when in reality the work of elections is year round. Thus these communities of practice may provide peer interaction, support, and valuable information at times other than those concentrated around elections. In fact, when asked if they think their local election official peers interact as much as they should, most said that they could always collaborate more, but that their official day-to-day duties made it difficult, especially during the election season. Thus the value of information-sharing via these networks of support might actually prove more usable and valuable to them in times other than election season.

Our final set of preliminary findings comes from local election officials’ use of the Roundtable platform itself. We found that users of Roundtable found both logistical and interpersonal uses for the platform in the lead-up to the November election. While the plurality of users’ posts on Roundtable were

around community-building, many posts included specific technical questions. For instance, users asked about sharing electronic forms, asked questions about voting equipment, and about poll worker recruitment. The highest levels of usage clustered around the mail ballot application deadline and election day itself (see figure below) – highlighting the value of technical information when users approached time-sensitive deadlines.



Our **ongoing work** includes the following:

- Currently fielding post-election survey in pilot states; conducting more 1:1 interviews with election officials
- Potentially expanding Roundtable to next group of states in 2023
- Gathering data from both pilot states (who had Roundtable offered to them pre-election) and non-pilot states to measure causal impact of Roundtable on election admin. outcomes