

Exploring Rural Election Administration

With Special Attention to the Mississippi River Delta

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INTERIM REPORT

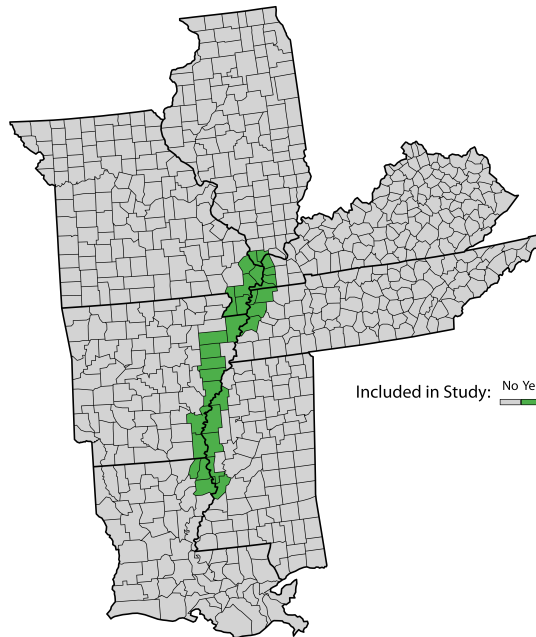
This document serves as an interim report for our grant project. We have begun work on all phases of the project, although the most significant phase is not slated to begin until next month. Our coding efforts thus far have been successful having coded all counties in the states we plan to visit for the qualitative phase of the project. We have made contact with the officials we plan to invite to our focus groups, and those will begin late next month. On the whole we started later than we initially planned, but we are not far behind our proposed timeline and remain on track to wrap up the project by the timing of the ESRA conference. The coding and administrative data analyses will continue until completed in the late spring or early summer.

Our coding effort consists of our hired students coding the (official) election websites of each county in (eventually) all states. We initially double coded several states to ensure agreement and, once calibrated, the coding began in earnest. We are currently coding whether the following items for each of the websites: URL, election results, early voting information, absentee (mail) information, UOCAVA information, change of address options, poll worker application, candidate information, election schedule, felon information, sample ballot, vote-by-mail tracking, polling location, voter ID requirements, voter registration options, change of address/cancel registration, and registration status. These coded data will then be merged with indicators of rurality for further analysis and reporting once the coding is complete. We will share examples of the coding results in our presentation.

As indicated in our proposal, we plan to conduct focus groups with election officials in the lower Mississippi Delta region. The counties we are targeting are shown in [Figure 1](#) below. We have made contact with all of the local election officials in the counties included in the map above and have commitments from at least one in each state already. Our plan is to arrange a series of three to four geographically accessible focus groups of local election officials.

The groups will involve discussions of election administration in general, the perceived challenges for administering elections in rural jurisdictions, and the unique aspects of both created by Covid-19 both in 2020 and 2022 along with any interesting lines of discussion around CARES Act funding

Figure 1: Mississippi River Delta Counties Included in Research Plan



and expenditures.¹ Each group will include 3–4 election officials and will last approximately 90 minutes. The discussion guide for the focus groups will be developed in partnership with our LEO partner and subject-matter consultant and we will pre-test each question for clarity, effectiveness, and respectful content. The groups will be audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The project team will comply with proper storage of both the audio records and transcripts, and any identifiable information will be removed before analyses are conducted. We are looking forward to discussing our plans for this part of the project with colleagues at the workshop.

The other phase of our project involves examining the differences in election administration outcomes in rural versus non-rural jurisdictions in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. This primarily involves examining the impact of rurality on accepted measures of election performance (primarily based on the EPI) in a regression framework. This variables include rejected registrations, UOCAVA ballot rejection/return rates, mail ballot rejection/return rates, and provisional ballot cast/rejection rates. With respect to the recent mid-term elections, we will update our analyses to compare 2018 to 2022 once those data (for 2022) are available.² We plan to present preliminary results from these analyses as the workshop. We plan to examine any potential effects from the pandemic to determine if rural jurisdictions were affected differently than their urban counterparts. We plan to use the opportunity of the workshop to acquire access to other data that can be used in these analyses. We look forward to presenting more details to the group next week and hearing any feedback.

¹A number of the example research questions in the RFP will be incorporated into the discussion guide, but we are open to additional thoughts from the group at the workshop.

²This may take place after the period of performance ends, but we will keep MEDSL apprised of ongoing updates as time and capacity allow.