

# Election Worker Recruitment and Retention in North Carolina

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## **Abstract**

Well trained and competent election officials are a necessary component for the smooth functioning of elections. Since 2019, 43% of Elections Director positions, the top county-level election officials, have turned over in North Carolina. Nationally, greater numbers of election directors are reporting difficulty hiring and retaining poll workers and election judges. To understand why election workers are leaving their positions, and how they might be retained, we worked with North Carolina Elections Director Karen Brinson Bell to develop a survey that aimed to uncover the reasons election workers leave their positions and the policies that might induce election workers to stay. We found that Elections Directors and full-time staff report a changed work environment post-2020. Overwhelming majorities report that workload, job stress, and threats to elections workers are up, while compensation has not kept up in many North Carolina counties. Majorities report that enhanced salary and benefits are the item that would most likely encourage them to continue working in elections.

# Accomplishments

## Project Description

The landscape of election administration has changed dramatically in the last decade. Controversy surrounding the 2020 general election generated by former President Trump and other election deniers has led to a surge in threats and harassment made against local election administrators. At the same time, an aging work force, the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and a tightening labor market have all influenced the decisions made by individuals considering whether or not to continue working in election administration. From 2019 to 2022, 43% of Elections Director positions turned over in North Carolina. Additionally, great concern has arisen in the media about a shortage of poll workers — whether attributed to COVID risks, the “great resignation,” or threats made against election workers, media reports have taken up a narrative of poll worker scarcity (Sherman and Stepnick (2022); Wang (2022); Montellaro (2022); Hamilton (2022), but see Greenberger (2024)).

Our focus in this project is on the institutional capacity to administer elections in North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> Elections in North Carolina are administered primarily at the county level. Each county has an appointed Board of Elections that hires and supervises an Elections Director. In many counties, the Elections Director hires and supervises staff members who assist the Director in administering elections. In addition, the Elections Director and their staff assist the county Board of Elections and the county’s party officials in appointing and training election judges and other poll workers. The overwhelming majority of the work of administering elections in North Carolina is conducted by three groups of officials: (1) Elections Directors, (2) staff who work under the Elections Director,

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<sup>1</sup>The questions we address are, of course, not unique to North Carolina.

and (3) election judges and poll workers. Our analyses focus on these three groups of officials.

In consultation with Karen Brinson Bell, the executive director of the State Board of Elections in North Carolina we identified three threats that could be limiting the ability of North Carolina counties to have sufficient institutional capacity to administer elections in the wake of the 2020 election: (1) COVID-19, (2) macroeconomic conditions (primarily inflation and tight labor markets), and (3) security threats to elections officials. We designed and implemented a survey instrument that for each of these threats assessed how serious each concern is to current election officials, how each concern affects the propensity of election officials to continue serving as an election official, and what policies could be implemented at either the state or county level to mitigate each concern.

We conducted a single-wave survey in the Winter of 2022 to the full population of county Elections Directors, county-level election staffers, and, in some counties, election judges and poll workers. We asked a battery of questions about the respondent's job experience and background, reasons for choosing to work in elections, compensation, and the importance of COVID, economic conditions, threats, and job stress on their willingness to continue to work in elections.<sup>2</sup> Surveys were distributed via email using Qualtrics.<sup>3</sup>

Our response rate for Election Directors was 94.9%!<sup>4</sup> It is more difficult to compute the response rate for year-round staff and poll workers. In some counties we had individual email addresses for staff and poll workers. Of those we emailed individually our response

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<sup>2</sup>Our survey was piloted in Orange County before being sent to all counties.

<sup>3</sup>This method did limit our ability to reach some poll workers and election judges. A number of Election Directors for rural counties reported that they did not have email addresses for poll workers and election judges, with some remarking that these individuals did not use computers or e-mail.

<sup>4</sup>We received a completed response from Election Directors 93 counties (there are 100 in the state) , 2 directorships were vacant at the time we launched the survey, and 1 director spoke to us verbally but did not complete the emailed survey.

Table 1: Percent Indicating that Election Work is Interesting and/or Fulfilling

	Election Directors	Staffers
Always	34.1	40.6
Usually	46.2	42.2
Sometimes	15.4	14.1
Not Usually/Never	4.4	3.1

rate was 38% for staff and 29.3% for poll workers and election judges. In other counties we relied on the Elections Director to forward our survey to their staff and poll workers. Overall, we have responses from year-round staff in 48.8% of counties that have year-round staff.<sup>5</sup> We have responses from poll workers in 10% of counties in the state. Our sample includes 93 Election Directors, 80 year-round staff, and 580 poll workers.

## Major Findings

Figure 1 reports overall job satisfaction for all three levels of election workers that we surveyed. It is clear that overwhelming majorities of election workers we surveyed are satisfied with the jobs they are performing. Directors, year-round staff, and poll workers indicated overall job satisfaction by reporting their level of satisfaction on a scale of 0-100 (0 being completely unsatisfied, 100 being totally satisfied).

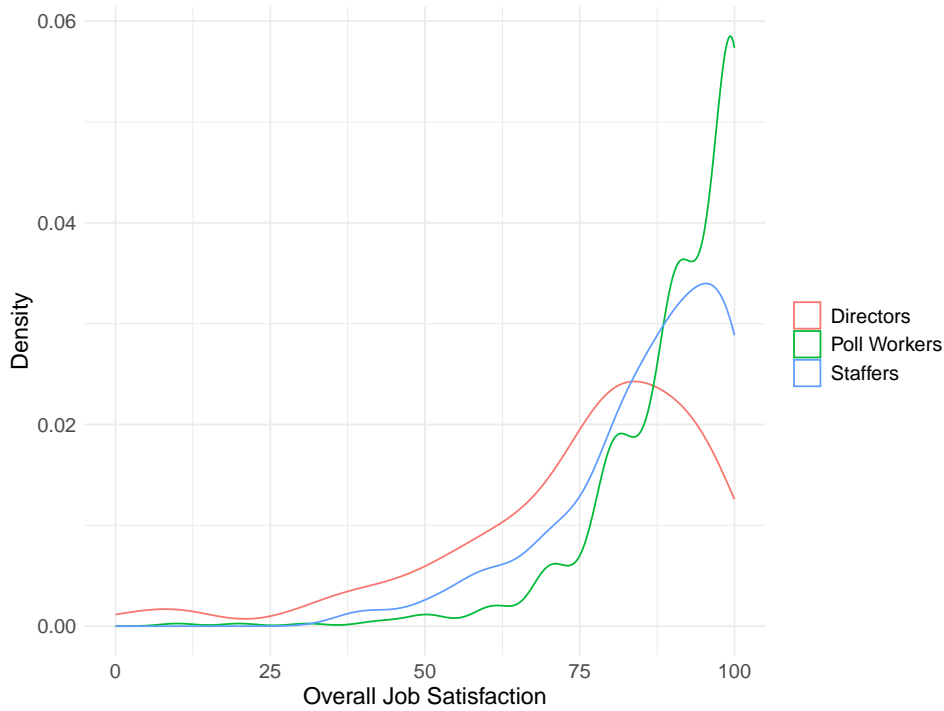
Similarly, Table 1 reports the extent to which Elections Directors and full-time staff find their work to be either interesting or fulfilling. Again here the news is encouraging. Overwhelming majorities report that election work is either always or usually interesting and/or fulfilling. This may be what is keeping many of our respondents in the work despite the challenges we document below.

Table 2 begins to document some of the challenges to working in elections that we have been able to document. Approximately one-third of Elections Directors and full-time

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<sup>5</sup>Fourteen counties reported no year-round elections staff other than the Elections Director.

Figure 1: Overall Job Satisfaction



staff report that the workload associated with their current job has increased since 2019. This is not surprising as we know that public records requests are up nationwide. In addition, North Carolina had a statewide recount of a Supreme Court race in 2020 that resulted in the winning candidate prevailing with 401 votes out of more than 5.4 million ballots cast statewide. This event alone was enough to increase workload for elections staff. In addition, the spike in mail-in absentee ballots in the 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic also created considerable more work for Elections Directors and full-time staff.

Table 2: Percent Indicating that Workload has Increased since 2019

	Election Directors	Staffers
A Lot	34.1	28.1
A Little	12.1	4.7
A Moderate Amount	26.4	23.4
Not at all	2.2	0
N/A	25.3	43.8

It is not just workload that has increased. Table 3 reports on change in job-related stress for Elections Directors and staffers since beginning their current positions. Almost 90% of Elections Directors report increased job-related stress. This is particularly noteworthy given that the median time in current position is only 5 years. The increase in job-related stress is not as acute for full-time staff, but it is still the case that more than a majority report an increase in stress. The median service time is only 2 years for our staff respondents, so most started after the 2020 election, or a time when stress levels had likely already increased in the office.

Table 3: Change in Job-Related Stress Since Beginning Current Position

	Election Directors	Staffers
Increased	86.8	61.9
Stayed the Same	11	23.8
Decreased	2.2	14.3

Results of the inquiry into the threat environment faced by election workers are highly concerning. Table 4 reports the frequency of threats against workers since 2020. Overwhelming majorities of directors and staff report that threats have increased since 2020. It is also noteworthy that not a single respondent to our survey reported that threats have decreased since 2020.

Table 4: Percent Indicating that Threats Against Election Workers Have:

	Election Directors	Staffers
Decreased	0.0	0.0
Stayed the same	8.6	6.3
Increased	84.9	64.1
Not sure/Don't Know	4.3	29.7

Our respondents are not optimistic about things improving either. Table 5 reports that overwhelming majorities expect threats to become more frequent in the future and very few expect the threat environment to improve.

Table 5: Do \_\_\_\_\_ expect threats and harassment of election officials to get more frequent, less frequent, or stay about the same in the future?

	Election Directors	Staffers
Less frequent	3.2	0.0
Stay the same	10.8	12.5
More frequent	71.0	68.8
Not sure	14.8	18.8

Turning from impressions to personal experience, Table 6 reports on the percentage of respondents who have personally been threatened. Just over 25% of Elections Directors have personally experience a threat and just over 10% of full-time staff report the same. We do not know if this is because Elections Directors experience more threats due to the position or if the relative inexperience of staff (most have not worked a presidential election) is driving this result.

Table 6: Percent Indicating That They Personally Have Been Threatened

Election Directors	Staffers	Poll Workers
25.8	10.9	4.1

The threat environment has clearly affected how our respondents think about what



the future holds for them. As Table 7 reveals, close to 75% of respondents are concerned about the personal safety and/or safety of their colleagues in future elections. More than 75% expect verbal harassment and a majority of Elections Directors fear being assaulted on the job.

Table 7: Percent Indicating That They Are Somewhat Concerned or Very Concerned with \_\_\_\_\_ in Future Elections

	Election Directors	Staffers
Your personal safety	75.3	67.2
Safety of colleagues	89.2	75.0
Verbal harassment	81.7	76.6
Being assaulted on the job	61.3	45.3

Taken together these results present a grim picture of the work environment faced by Elections Directors and their staff. Workload is up, stress is up, threats have increased, and there is little evidence that our respondents expect the situation to improve. Given these results it is little wonder that turnover in these positions is so high. A major goal of our project is to assess what kinds of policies could be implemented that would assist in the recruitment and retention of election workers. In Table 8 we report results from a question where we asked respondents what would be most likely to encourage them to stay in their current position or to move to a director job in the future. The results clearly point to pay increases as the policy intervention most likely to affect a respondent's future decisions. We were somewhat surprised to see minimal support for increasing security given the responses reported above regarding the threat environment.

Table 8: Which of the following policies would be most likely to encourage you (elections directors/staffer) to stay on as an elections director in the future?

	Elections Directors	Staffers
Pay raise	53.8	56.3
More staff support	16.1	NA
Increased security	4.3	10.9
Increased training	3.2	9.4
Other	12.9	10.9

Digging deeper into pay for full-time staff we asked them how their current compensation compared to what they thought they could earn in the private sector. As Table 9 reveals, more than two-thirds thought they could earn more in the private sector than if they stayed in elections work and only 5.5% though they would take a pay cut if they moved to the private sector.

Table 9: Staff Current Pay Compared to Private Sector

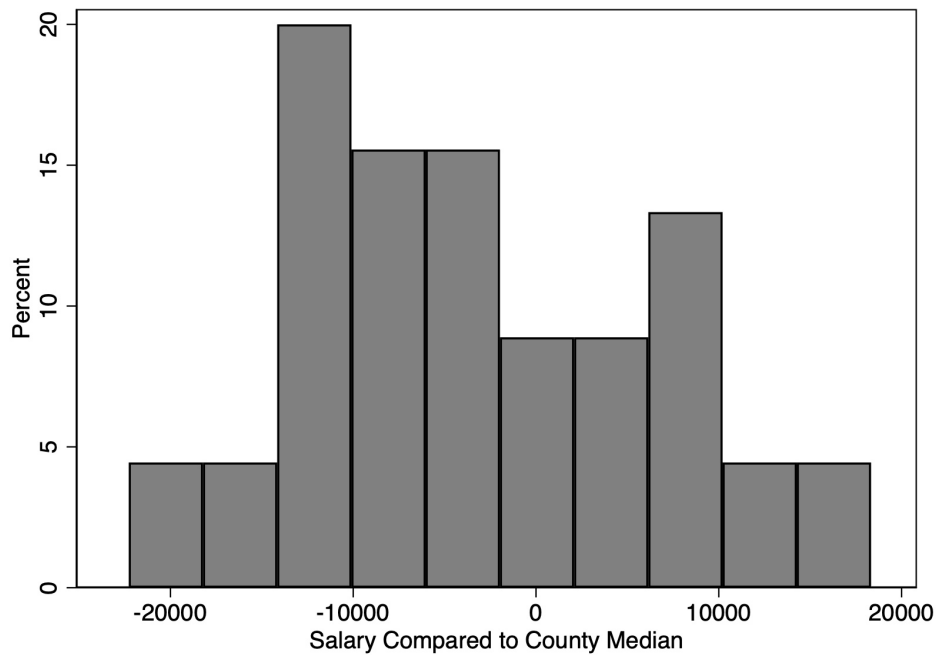
	Percent Indicating
Earnings Would Increase	69.1
Earnings Would Remain the Same	25.5
Earnings Would Decrease	5.5

These results match our data in Figure 2 which compares reported year-round staff salary to the median salary of the county they work in.<sup>6</sup> Positive numbers indicate salaries above the county median, negative numbers are below the county median. The average year-round staff member makes \$3,139 less than the county median, while the median respondent makes \$5,383 or 11.8% less than the county median.

In summary, our findings demonstrate a sharply changed work environment for Elections Directors and the full-time who work along side them. Workload, stress, and

<sup>6</sup>Some respondents reported annual salary, while others reported hourly wages. We converted all hourly responses to annual salaries.

Figure 2: Staff Salary Compared to County Median



threats are up, but salaries lag behind comparable job in the county. The results do differ somewhat for each class of individual we surveyed. Elections Directors, who are the chief elections officers in each North Carolina county, consistently report that increase threats and job related stress post-2020 are having the greatest impact on their job enjoyment and willingness to continue serving in their current role. Year-round staff, while also expressing some concerns about the threat environment, report that compensation is the biggest barrier to continued work in the elections field.

## Dissemination of Results

We have disseminated result from our study at the 2023 Midwest Political Science Association, the 2023 Elections Science, Reform, and Administration Conference, and at the 2023 North Carolina State Elections Conference.

## Products

- Dataset of responses to our three surveys. We are requesting to embargo the data for one year per the RFP guidelines.
- Presentation slides from the 2023 North Carolina State Elections Conference
- Conference papers

## Participants

Karen Brinson Bell, executive director for the North Carolina State Board of Elections worked closely with us to develop our survey and to encourage directors and staff to complete the survey.

## Impact

Our project has contributed to the field by highlighting the problems facing counties in North Carolina in recruiting and retaining election workers. The issues we identify such as increased stress, low pay, and workplace threats are not unique to North Carolina and are likely to be issues in other jurisdictions. Our results suggest that higher pay is the policy option that election worker suggest would be most effective. Increasing election administrator pay would of course have larger consequences for the election administration budgeting process (Kropf et al. 2024). Although our surveys did not collect gender or racial identity data in order to assuage concerns around anonymity, future changes to election administrator pay structures should take into account research on gender pay-gaps in election administration work and pay equity and professionalism (Brown et al. 2019; Clark and James 2023). Should administrative burden and emotional exhaustion

continue to increase (Barsky et al. 2023), states should also consider policy remedies to deal with election administrator burnout (Clark et al. 2023).

We presented these results to over 700 staffers, Directors, and county Board of Elections members in August of 2023. A number of counties plan to use our results to seek a reclassification of positions in their elections office to allow for increased salaries. We also intend to meet with Director Bell to discuss how our results can be used to achieve policy change in North Carolina.

## **Changes and/or Problems**

We had difficulty reaching the full population of election staffers and poll workers. Email addresses for these individuals are not public and there was not a centralized list maintained by the state. As such, we were forced to rely on Elections Directors to either provide us with email addresses or forward an email with a link to the survey to the appropriate individuals. We had limited success with these methods and by relying on forwarding it is impossible to precisely calculate a response rate. For full-time staff we do think we have a representative sample from a variety of types of counties across the state. We are, however, missing responses from the two largest counties in the state—Wake and Mecklenburg. For poll workers we have an especially limited sample from only 10 counties in the state. Further complicating inferences from these data, more than 60% of the responses are from two counties—Orange and Brunswick. We are missing responses from most rural counties as they reported not having email addresses for election judges and poll workers. We also do not have responses from the largest five counties in the state. As such our sample is neither random, nor representative, which places some limits on the kinds of inferences we can draw from these data.

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