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Improving the Pipeline of Election Officials *Strengthening Recruitment, Retention, and Professional Development in U.S. Election Administration*

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Executive Sessions are a convening of individuals of independent standing who take joint responsibility for rethinking and improving society's responses to an issue. The **Executive Session on Elections and Election Administration** is a three-year program that brings leading election officials from across the country and political spectrum together with scholars and well informed "others" to discuss the long-term challenges they confront and how to address them.

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Executive Summary

The challenge: To run secure and reliable elections, the United States relies on roughly 10,000 officials whose work has grown more complex and more contested. Long hours, fixed deadlines, threats and harassment, and persistent misinformation have driven a wave of departures in recent years, with an estimated 40% of administrators expected to leave the field between the 2024 and 2028 presidential cycles.

Why a pipeline strategy? Workforce shortages in election administration are both a recruitment and a retention problem. Treating the issue only as a recruitment challenge pours new entrants into a leaky pipeline. A durable pipeline strategy combines clear professional pathways, evidence-based recruitment that lowers behavioral barriers to entry, and retention practices that protect experienced officials and their institutional knowledge.

Key Findings

- **Recruitment is a sequence, not a single decision.** Drop-off can occur at any stage of the process, from considering whether to apply all the way through the first day on the job.
- **"Public service" messaging alone is not enough.** Field experiments in other settings show that emphasizing the challenge of the

work or career benefits expands and diversifies applicant pools without lowering candidate quality.

- **Fellowships drive both recruitment and retention.** Public-sector fellows are more likely to enter and remain in government for up to eight years, compared with similarly motivated individuals, backed by durable peer ties built through their cohorts.
- **Retention rests on two underused levers.** Peer and supervisory support are consistently linked to lower burnout and intent to quit, and both can be scaled affordably across offices.
- **You cannot manage what you do not measure.** Pulse surveys and consistent workforce data surface burnout signals—and positive outliers—before they become resignations.

What Leaders Can Do Now

- Map each stage of the recruitment process locally and identify ways to remove or reduce friction points.
- Pilot recruitment messages that emphasize challenge and career benefits alongside service.
- Establish or expand a fellowship program; Colorado and Arizona offer two scalable templates.
- Invest in supervisor training and structured peer-support networks across offices.
- Build a routine workforce data practice by combining administrative metrics with short, regular pulse surveys.

1. The Workforce Challenge

A Human-Driven System Under Pressure

Elections are an unusually human-driven process. Voters cast ballots, while a permanent and seasonal workforce registers voters, maintains voter lists, prepares for upcoming elections, issues ballots, and runs polling places on Election Day. Changing public demands and shifting election policies have steadily increased the workload this group must absorb. At the same time, those who run elections face intense and growing public scrutiny, combined with an expectation of perfection rarely faced in other public services.

The result is a structural tension: a rising need for skilled administrators alongside accelerating attrition. [Studies](#) of the local election official workforce indicate that an estimated 40% of administrators will have left the field between the 2024 and 2028 presidential elections. Widening the pipeline of future administrators—and improving job satisfaction among those already in the field—has therefore become a defining workforce challenge for U.S. elections.

The infrastructure to respond to this challenge already exists, in part. The Institute of Election Administration Research & Practice—a long-standing collaboration between Election Center and Auburn University—and the more recent Certificate in Election Administration at the University of Minnesota have built nationally recognized training pipelines. Academic research at the University of Maryland on election resilience and at the Election and Voting Information Center (EVIC, co-led by Reed College and Portland State University) on job satisfaction continues to expand the evidence base. Think tanks such as the Bipartisan Policy Center

translate these findings into practical implementation. Building on this foundation, this paper assesses the current state of pipeline reforms and identifies what evidence and recent practice suggest leaders should do next.

Why Officials Are Leaving: Stress, Threats, and Structural Demands

There are an estimated 10,000 election officials in the United States, including both full-time staff and part-time local administrators, with primary responsibility for administering elections. The stresses they face have changed sharply over the past decade. Before 2016, the leading concerns were aging technology, underfunding, and litigation. After 2016, concerns expanded to foreign interference and emerging narratives of election fraud. Then, beginning in 2020, they metastasized into open defiance of election outcomes and a new pattern of threatening behavior directed at officials themselves.

Running elections has always meant long hours, tight deadlines, and no room for error. What has changed is the environment around the work. Officials now manage complex operations while also navigating security risks, public hostility, and credible fears for their safety and that of their families.

Threats and Harassment

In a May 2024 Brennan Center survey, **38% of local election officials reported being threatened, harassed, or abused for doing their jobs**—up from 30% the previous year ([Brennan Center for Justice, 2024](#)). These incidents extend far beyond abusive emails; they include bomb threats, swatting calls, suspicious packages, and sustained harassment online and by phone. During the 2024 cycle,

law enforcement agencies responded to hundreds of bomb threats across the country, many directed at polling places or election offices on or near Election Day. Even when these threats prove to be hoaxes, the operational response is real: evacuations, police involvement, and rapid decisions in already tense environments.

Officials are typically the first to receive these threats and the first to decide how to respond. In many jurisdictions, the initial call to law enforcement comes from the election office, not the other way around. Officials must weigh safety against their legal obligation to keep polling locations open, all while coordinating with police and briefing voters and the press. In effect, they have become crisis managers—a role that was never part of the job description.

Public hostility is amplified by misinformation about how elections are run and how votes are counted. For officials who have dedicated years or decades to public service, being accused of wrongdoing simply for doing their jobs creates a kind of moral strain that is difficult to absorb and corrosive over time.

Persistent Operational Pressure

Meanwhile, the traditional demands of the work have not eased. Elections are governed by strict statutes and fixed deadlines that do not bend when something goes wrong. During early voting, Election Day, and post-election processing, 12- to 16-hour days are common and can stretch for weeks. When equipment fails, offices are short-staffed, or facilities must be evacuated, there is no pause button. Sustained pressure of this kind reliably produces exhaustion, burnout, and fatigue.

For many officials, the stress follows them home. Threats that mention home addresses, doxxing, or swatting calls have made personal

safety a real concern. A [Brennan Center for Justice survey](#) in 2023 found that 11% of election workers said they were likely to leave their jobs by 2024, and that nearly one in three reported having been harassed, abused, or threatened because of their job. For a field that depends heavily on experience and institutional knowledge, this level of attrition risk poses a serious problem.

2. Building the Pipeline: An Evidence-Based Approach to Recruitment

Growing dissatisfaction has led to both attrition and a personnel shortage. In response, election leaders have partnered with organizations and experts to build a range of programs to expand the pipeline of qualified candidates. The most effective of these treat recruitment not as a single ask but as a sequence of decisions.

Treat Recruitment as a Sequence of Behavioral Hurdles

It helps to view the pipeline as a series of small behavioral hurdles rather than one large “why don’t people apply?” problem. To enter the field, a candidate must: (a) consider election work as an option, (b) sign up for the required coursework, (c) complete that coursework, (d) respond to a job posting or outreach message, (e) submit the paperwork and complete a screening, and (f) show up for training and their first shift. Drop-off at any single stage shrinks and homogenizes the final workforce. Because the primary bottleneck differs across jurisdictions and roles, best practice is to map where attrition occurs and treat each stage as a testable point of intervention. Effective strategies from other sectors include reducing information costs,

removing frictions, clarifying next steps, shortening or re-sequencing requirements, and making progress feel immediate rather than distant ([Wallace et al., 2022](#)).

Test Messaging in Real Time

Message testing is central to this approach. Evidence from randomized field experiments in other parts of government recruitment shows that appeals to public service motivation alone often fail to expand applicant pools; instead, they tend to resonate primarily with those already inclined toward public-sector work. In one police recruitment study, messaging that emphasized the challenge of the work or career benefits substantially increased applications without lowering applicant quality, whereas public-service framing on its own had no effect ([Linos, 2018](#)). Similar approaches with recent college graduates show that highlighting systemic impact or the difficulty of the work can shift not only how many people apply to government roles, but also who applies.

Consider the Administrative Burden of Recruitment

Hiring processes themselves are powerful behavioral barriers. From a behavioral perspective, red tape shows up as time costs, uncertainty, and hassle, all of which deter qualified candidates even when motivation is high. Time-to-hire is a useful proxy: lengthy applications, unclear eligibility requirements, repeated documentation requests, and long silences each raise the probability of candidate drop-off. In election administration, these frictions compound structural challenges such as temporary contracts, background checks, and compressed timelines. Treating administrative burden as part

of recruitment means paying close attention to where coursework, paperwork, and screening sit in the sequence, while ensuring requirements and timelines are communicated clearly.

Leverage Fellowships as a Multi-Purpose Recruitment and Retention Tool

Fellowship-based models address several behavioral barriers at once. They reduce entry costs by providing a clear, supported pathway into election work, structured training, and explicit job expectations. Crucially, they also bundle entry into a cohort, which bolsters long-term retention. Longitudinal evidence from four public-sector fellowship programs shows that fellows are significantly more likely to enter and remain in government work for up to eight years after the program begins, even when compared with similarly motivated peers ([Scieपुरa, Wall, and Linos, 2025](#)). Fellowships, in other words, function as a retention mechanism as well as a recruitment one. By training together, fellows develop shared reference points and build social ties that persist long after formal programming ends. This combination of clear entry, skill-building, and cohort-based connection makes fellowships a vital component of a long-term workforce development strategy for election administration.

3. Keeping People in the Field: Evidence on Retention

Once recruited, retaining election workers long enough for them to become experienced is a central challenge. Two evidence-based levers are particularly applicable in the public sector: peer support and supervisory support.

Peer Support

Social connectedness, in various forms, is consistently associated with improved engagement, lower burnout, and reduced intent to quit. Importantly, social connection can be fostered among individuals who do not already know each other. In a field experiment with 911 dispatchers, a relatively low-cost intervention asking dispatchers to share advice and experiences with peers across nine cities significantly reduced burnout and lowered resignations ([Linos, Ruffini, and Wilcoxon, 2022](#)). For election administration, where many offices are small and isolated, providing infrastructure for peer connection—even anonymously—can serve as a central pillar of workforce stability.

Supervisory Support

One of the strongest predictors of employee engagement and job satisfaction is the quality of a worker's relationship with their supervisor. Fortunately, good leadership can be taught. Evidence from randomized leadership-training interventions shows that improving front-line management practices increases employee engagement and improves organizational outcomes ([Jacobsen et al., 2022](#)).

Measure the Workforce

An often-overlooked component of workforce strategy is the systematic collection of timely employee data. Workforce shortages are frequently framed as recruitment or pipeline problems, when, in practice, they are often driven by retention challenges that are invisible without the right data. Administrative data—such as hiring, attrition, tenure, and absenteeism rates—can show where losses

are occurring but rarely explain why. Regular pulse or engagement surveys close that gap by capturing early signals of burnout, disengagement, and frustration before they become resignations. When collected consistently and paired with clear benchmarks, these data enable leadership to diagnose problems more accurately and identify high-performing offices, teams, or jurisdictions operating under similar constraints. These positive outliers offer concrete operational models, shifting workforce management from reactive hiring to evidence-based practice.

4. Models in Practice

Programs across the country illustrate how the principles outlined above are being put into practice. The five examples below fall into two groups: established certification and degree programs that build a profession, and newer fellowship programs that create direct on-ramps into election work.

Certification and Degree Programs

The CERA Program: Election Center and Auburn University

More than 40 years ago, the first certification program for election professionals began as a collaboration between Auburn University and the National Association of Election Officials (Election Center). In 2018, the partnership formalized into the [Institute of Election Administration Research & Practice](#), and in 2020 began offering classes online in response to the pandemic—a popular and cost-effective shift that expanded its reach. Through 2025, the program issued 1,621 [Certified Elections Registration Administration](#) (CERA) certifications, with its largest graduating class to date (142 graduates) in 2025.

The CERA certification is open to association members, a network that spans government and election officials, vendors and service providers, and nonprofits and academics working in election administration. Each course requires 10 hours of instruction. Certification also requires attendance at two industry events with a minimum of five hours of election-related content each. At least one must be an Election Center event, such as a spring workshop or annual conference. Course 5, Ethics in Election Administration and Voter Registration, is offered only in person. While members have up to 12 years to complete the program, the many online options have reduced the typical completion time to around two years. Courses are taught by current and former Auburn professors, and course costs range from \$459 to \$559 depending on the format. Certification remains active for three years and renewal requires one renewal course and two events during that period, keeping CERA professionals current and connected.

REO Certification Program: Election Center State Programs

Election Center also runs a state-level certification, the [Registered Election Official \(REO\)](#) program, in collaboration with state associations of election officials or chief election officials. The modular curriculum typically consists of eight to 10 core courses, each balancing national content with state-specific material. Each three-hour class is taught by an election administrator chosen by the state from an Election Center roster, while Election Center handles registration, attendance, student records, and certification. To maintain REO certification, renewal mirrors the CERA cycle, with one class plus two events every three years. Texas, California, Idaho, and

Virginia currently participate; classes are conducted in person, with each state deciding how many to offer per year. At \$99 per class plus instructor fees, some associations use the program as a small revenue stream.

Certificate in Election Administration: University of Minnesota

Following the call from the [Presidential Commission on Election Administration](#) to professionalize the field and attract new talent, the University of Minnesota launched its [Certificate in Election Administration](#) (CEA) in 2014. Where Election Center focuses on building a profession from within, the CEA program was designed to expose new people to election administration. Initial recruits were graduate students in MPA and MPP programs; over time, undergraduates and members of the public joined as well. Today, roughly half of all students are traditional undergraduate or graduate students, while the other half are members of the public, often seeking a second career.

The fully online, 12-credit program comprises three core courses: Survey of Election Administration, Elections and the Law, and Strategic Management of Election Administration (seven credits total), with the remaining five filled through one- and two-credit electives. Most courses run a full semester on the traditional academic calendar and are taught by prominent national experts. While students apply to the university to take courses, virtually every application is accepted. Tuition runs \$620.50 per undergraduate credit and \$1,179 per graduate credit. Since 2014, the CEA program has produced more than 100 graduates, most of whom were hired directly into elections-related jobs. Because formal education in this field is still uncommon, CEA holders frequently skip entry-level roles and enter at the managerial level.

Other universities have begun to follow this model. The [newest example](#) launched in Arizona in 2025 and is a joint effort among Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, and Northern Arizona University. Programs of this kind require in curriculum, faculty, and infrastructure, making early, visible success critical to long-term sustainability.

Fellowship Programs

A more recent strategy is the creation of fellowship programs as direct on-ramps into election work. With attrition rising, a handful of state offices and larger local offices have partnered with local colleges to give interested students hands-on experience in real election environments. The two examples below—Colorado and Arizona—took very different operational approaches, yet both have successfully produced new election officials.

Colorado Elections Division Fellowship Program

The Colorado Elections Division Fellowship began in 2005 as an internship for law students and those in related graduate programs, later expanding to include occasional undergraduates. Since 2005, 49 fellows have completed the program. Five became full-time employees of the State Elections Division, including Hilary Rudy (the first elections fellow and current deputy director of the Elections Division), Ben Schler (who managed the legal team and served as an aide to Secretary Jena Griswold), and Stacey Van Zuiden Scholl (a Federal Voting Assistance Program regional manager). Several others moved into public-interest or elections-adjacent roles, including attorneys representing municipalities and special districts and private campaign-finance practitioners.

Run by the Colorado Department of State, the program provides hands-on experience for students and post-graduates exploring elections administration. Fellowships are typically paid, with participants working up to 25 hours per week at approximately \$25 an hour. The average fellow works for an academic semester (about four months), completes one major research or policy project, and earns approximately \$10,000 total, though some stay up to six months.

Most fellows are placed within the Elections Division and managed by Rudy. The focus of any given fellowship is shaped by the fellow's area of interest and division needs. While most fellows have been law students working with the legal team, placements span different areas. Each fellow is assigned a mentor who sets a research timeline, balances assignments, provides feedback, and supports professional networking. Past projects have included legal and legislative research; comparative analyses of local, state, federal, and international laws and processes; education, outreach, and training; and data analysis. In one often-cited example, 2017 fellow Bradley Kershaw measured mail-ballot delivery times between a metro Denver address and addresses on the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute reservations, finding that sending and delivering reservation mail ballots averaged five days longer. That research continues to be cited and helped inform legislation extending the mail-ballot mailing deadline.

Arizona Election Administration Student Fellowship Program

While Colorado employs an average of two fellows per year, Arizona launched a significantly larger program in 2024. Funded by the Arizona Rescue Plan Act in cooperation

with the Arizona Governor's office, the Arizona Election Administration Student Fellowship Program invited students from Arizona's public universities and community colleges to apply for placements at the Arizona Secretary of State's office or county election offices. More than 65 students applied for 18 positions; the Secretary of State's office reviewed applications and ultimately awarded 16 fellowships across eight county offices and two within the state office.

Onboarding and supporting so many students simultaneously across the state was a substantial logistical undertaking, requiring significant time from both state- and county-level staff. The Secretary of State's office worked directly with counties to manage recruitment, selection, training, housing, and payroll—freeing counties to provide an authentic elections-administration experience. The state office also ran a two-day, in-person “Election 101” orientation alongside weekly virtual training sessions and check-in meetings. Fellows assumed active roles in election operations, with some leading major initiatives connected to the 2024 general election.

Four Arizona fellows have transitioned into full-time roles with the counties—three as election administrators and one in a related position. Others returned to law or graduate school with the intention of pursuing elections-related careers. The Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), which co-sponsored the program, highlighted six key lessons in a 2025 report ([BPC, 2025](#)): fellows reported greater interest in election careers; many showed increased interest in other government careers as well; those interested in elections gravitated to election security, related IT work, and election law; fellows left with a markedly better understanding of Arizona election policy; fellows gained

confidence in addressing election misperceptions across the political spectrum; and the program filled real workforce gaps during a difficult election cycle.

Cross-Cutting Lessons from Colorado and Arizona

While the two programs sound similar, they operate very differently. Colorado hosts two or three students per year—mostly law students—for individualized four- to six-month projects. Based at the state office, fellows are matched with a single official or small team to work through a complex area of Colorado election law or policy. The model has remained largely unchanged for nearly two decades. Because the maximum annual obligation is roughly \$25,000, expenses are absorbed into existing payroll, requiring no outside funding.

Arizona’s 2024 cohort, by contrast, included 18 students across degree levels, paying them \$15,000 each plus additional support. Outside funding was required, and the program cost several hundred thousand dollars to run end to end. Most students worked for county election offices, taking on operational roles rather than state-level research projects.

Yet both models succeed despite their differences. Colorado has produced five state election officials over 19 years and a broader set of elections-adjacent practitioners. Arizona has produced three election officials in its first year alone and more may return to the field in the future. Critically, Arizona’s placements have been on the front lines—in the counties that register voters and create, mail, and tabulate ballots. Ultimately, the two designs offer states and large local offices a real choice: a small, predictable program with steady output, or a larger, splashier program

with greater upside that requires substantially more time and money.

5. Conclusion

Because of its prominence, election administration faces unusual attrition pressures. Yet unlike fields such as education, health care, and law, where similar pressures exist, elections have historically lacked a substantial professional pipeline to absorb them. Today, practitioners and partners are actively building one: forming a profession through associations and certification, creating clearer pathways into the field, and using fellowships to identify and retain future officials before they are pulled toward more conventional careers.

The findings collected here suggest a sector that is willing to test new ideas at exactly the moment when those ideas are most needed. Public hostility, intense scrutiny, and physical threats are unlikely to abate in the foreseeable future. If the United States is to be a global leader in election administration, it will need to protect its officials and continue building evidence-based strategies to attract and retain talent.

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