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Making the Case to Strengthen State Election Associations

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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

State associations for election administrators are the connective tissue between local election offices and chief election officials. When these associations are healthy—adequately staffed, fully funded, and professionally run—they improve the quality, consistency, and security of election administration. They do this by expanding training, accelerating the spread of best practices, fostering durable peer-to-peer support, and providing a credible channel for two-way communication with state officials and policymakers. In an environment of rapid legal change, intense public scrutiny, persistent misinformation (and disinformation), and high staff turnover, strong and independent election administrator associations are not a "nice to have"; they are essential operational infrastructure.

This memo makes the case for prioritizing investment in and maturation of state associations for four key reasons: (1) they perform critical functions that individual jurisdictions cannot perform alone; (2) the moment demands stronger statewide capacity; (3) a practical support model spanning governance, staffing, and sustainable funding is achievable; and (4) risks can be effectively understood and mitigated. Strengthening state election associations will help them

move from ad hoc, volunteer-only organizations to durable associations that can support and advocate for administrators year-round, especially in smaller jurisdictions with limited staff and budgets.

Background: The Capacity Gap in Local Election Administration

Local election offices vary dramatically in staffing, funding, and technical support. Administrators are asked to manage increasingly complex elections while also responding to new legislation, public records' demands, cybersecurity requirements, and heightened scrutiny. Many must also perform duties beyond election administration, such as recording, licensing, and archiving. At the same time, jurisdictions experience regular turnover, leading to lost institutional knowledge, leaving "lessons learned" siloed within local offices. The result is a predictable capacity gap: The system relies on extraordinary individual effort, uneven access to support and training, and informal networks that do not reliably reach every county or municipality.

Membership organizations of election administrators within a state, colloquially known as state associations, offer a scalable and field-tested way to close this gap. They are positioned to support day-to-day professionalization while remaining close enough to the work to be practical and trusted. Where these associations are weak or under-resourced, administrators lose a key mechanism for shared learning, coordinated training, and collective problem-solving.

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While the chief election authority, usually a secretary of state or state board of elections, can be a strong ally for local election administration, organized local professionals are best positioned to champion their own needs. After all, they actually conduct the election. In addition, local election officials often have deeper, more personal relationships with state legislators who author election statutes. Finally, in states with an elected chief election official, local election officials are less hampered by the political considerations that face statewide officeholders.

In 2017, Democracy Fund, a foundation that works to strengthen U.S. democratic institutions, launched a project to study state associations and provide networking opportunities for organizational leaders. At one end of the spectrum were well-established associations: sophisticated organizations providing certification programs, comprehensive member communication, and an advocacy presence managed by dedicated staff. At the other end of the spectrum were informal organizations with episodic meeting schedules and no structural support, largely run by volunteers who already have a "day job" as an election administrator (at a minimum, with many fulfilling additional roles in their local government). All project participants had some major characteristics in common: They were dedicated to improving their organization and serving its members, and they welcomed the opportunity to network and learn from one another.

Democracy Fund organized biannual networking sessions, with the first meetings focused on identifying existing gaps and how associations could benefit from regular communication and convenings. Starting in 2023, the "association work" moved to the National Association of Election Officials, commonly known as Election

Center, and formalized in 2025 as the Coalition of Election Association Leaders (CEAL). Under the leadership of Tammy Patrick and Pam Anderson, the coalition is supported by a nationally recognized team of senior advisors: Lori Augino, Matt Crane, Chris Piper, and advisor emerita Karen Brinson Bell. Research and project support are provided by Grace Gordon and Jared Marcotte of The Turnout. The CEAL team produced the "Association Maturation Guidebook: A Self-Assessment Guide to the Evolution of Election Associations." The guide provides a framework for associations to work through their governance, financial, and organizational characteristics to determine if they are informal, semiformal, or formal. It identifies areas for growth and improvement, crafting a pathway for state associations to move from informal to formal organizations.

Since 2024, Election Center's April Workshop has served as the annual gathering for association leaders and a network of supportive election officials. There, attendees work through association maturation tasks and learn about resources and tools to share with their members at their own meetings and conferences. The workshop invites state representatives as well as association leaders and typically draws participants from half the states, with nearly all states having attended at least once in the past three years. The Election Trust Initiative generously funds the CEAL team, provides necessary materials and branding, and offers support for the workshop.

The guidebook includes a general landscape assessment based on publicly available information from association websites and tax filings. Although most states have at least one association of election professionals—and some have more than one depending on the structure of the state election system (Alabama, for instance, has four associations)—only a handful are run by a dedicated executive director. In all other associations, the election officials run the organization on top of their full-time duties.

What State Associations Do (That Individuals and Single Jurisdictions Cannot)

Well-run state associations provide five core functions that improve election administration both locally and statewide:

- **Promote training and professional development:** Provide statewide conferences, regional trainings, onboarding for new administrators, continuing education, and certification support.
- **Foster peer networking and rapid problem-solving:** Serve as trusted channels for administrators to share templates, procedures, vendor experiences, and practical feedback in real time.
- **Strengthen communication with state leadership:** Create structured avenues to surface the operational effects of proposed changes and distribute timely guidance and updates.
- **Advance professional standards and culture:** Establish norms that reinforce nonpartisan administration, ethics, quality customer service, and a shared professional identity.
- **Coordinate lobbying and advocacy:** Organize legislative committees and engage contract lobbyists or an executive director who can lead efforts to lobby state policymakers and strategize when and how to involve local election administrators.

Why This Matters Now

Election administration faces simultaneous pressures: accelerating legal and procedural

changes, increased public scrutiny and misinformation, cybersecurity demands, technology modernization, and staffing challenges. In this context, statewide resilience depends on whether every jurisdiction—not just the largest and best-resourced—can access current training, vetted practices, and peer support. State associations offer one of the only mechanisms to provide that support at scale without creating a new government program.

A "stronger association" is not more bureaucracy. Rather, stronger associations bring a modest level of stable capacity—basic governance, predictable revenue, and at least part-time professional staffing. This allows administrators to concentrate on their daily work and benefit from year-round programming, not just through an annual meeting.

Furthermore, developing strong state associations that support local election officials puts election administration on par with other functions of state government. The Colorado County Clerks Association (CCCA), for instance, conducted a study comparing the resources other constitutional officers receive for professional development and found that the clerks' association was dramatically under resourced compared to peer associations, such as the sheriffs' and treasurers' associations. Identifying this inequity helped raise awareness of the need to provide election professionals with similar support and opportunities for professional growth, and thus best serve the communities that elected them.

What It Takes: Governance, Staffing, and Sustainable Funding

To be effective, associations need resources that reduce the burden on volunteer administrators and make participation feasible across the various local election offices. While volunteer leadership is essential, a volunteer-only model struggles to deliver consistent training, respond quickly to legislative changes, manage vendor relationships, and maintain institutional memory. Even small investments can unlock significant gains in quality and consistency. This requires support across four main areas:

- **Professional staff support:** an executive director (even part-time) to run operations; provide administrative support; and, where appropriate, manage policy capacity that complements, rather than replaces, member expertise.
- **Training and convening:** statewide conferences emphasizing practical instruction, regional workshops, webinars, and onboarding for new election administrators.
- **Participation support:** travel stipends, registration support, and regional meeting options so rural jurisdictions can participate.
- **Knowledge management:** maintaining templates, checklists, and shared resources, so lessons learned persist beyond individual tenures.

Illustrative State Examples (Colorado, Kentucky, Florida, and Pennsylvania)

While states differ in their legal structures, funding rules, and administrative culture, the same lesson continues to hold true: When administrators have a strong statewide professional home, implementation is smoother, innovation spreads faster, and small jurisdictions are less likely to be left behind. The following examples illustrate the kinds of challenges associations can help solve.

Colorado: Building Capacity Across Geography

Colorado is a large, geographically diverse state, with financially prosperous counties alongside counties facing systemic or seasonal challenges; these lead to limited county programs and four-day primary school weeks. Similarly, Colorado's election community spans large urban jurisdictions and remote counties, with geographic and population differences that might appear to test organizational stability. Interestingly, however, it is the very diversity of its constituents that empowers a strong state association. When the executive director speaks on behalf of the organization, the director represents both Democrats and Republicans, populous and rural counties, the mountains and the farms, helping counties look past their distinct regional challenges to build a streamlined, unified vision for election administration.

Consequently, the association has tremendous power in setting the state's policy agenda, advocating for changes to those policies, and ensuring proper implementation of their objectives. A highly functional association like the Colorado County Clerks Association (CCCA) helps ensure that Colorado election administrators in all offices, large and small, can access the same training, peer support, and implementation guidance as larger peers, especially when travel is difficult and staffing is thin. A strong, organized association can develop a support system to aid those counties that would otherwise be unable to participate in regional meetings, statewide travel, and external trainings. By presenting a unified front, the CCCA can be the difference between a fully engaged versus an isolated county operating on its own.

You might assume that the office representing the chief election official would oppose a strong association like the CCCA; however, the opposite is true. The counties and the state agree on most policy objectives, and when there is disagreement, working with a single executive director instead of various county election officials with differing policy perspectives makes reaching an agreement more straightforward. Because federal law requires that each state have a single "chief election official," that person can often become a lightning rod, seen as partisan even in nonpartisan situations. In states with a strong association, the chief election official must seek out county support when advocating for policy change, because the association represents not just one county's view but a broad, typically unified perspective of the Colorado elections community regardless of county wealth or capacity. This is why the Colorado Department of State and the CCCA work so closely together: It is in their best interests to do so.

Kentucky: Ensuring Small Offices Have a Seat at the Table

Each of Kentucky's 120 counties elects a county clerk to a four-year term with no term limits. County clerks serve as the local election administrators but also perform other duties, including recording deeds and registering vehicles. As a result, many deputy clerk office staff juggle elections alongside other job responsibilities.

The Kentucky County Clerks Association helps county clerks share best practices, create templates and checklists, and build a peer network so no single official is left to reinvent procedures alone. The association

hosts monthly training sessions and biannual conferences and offers several email listservs for clerks and deputies. It recently launched a web portal hosted by Civic Roundtable with discussion areas focused on elections and the other duties of the office. Kentucky law provides for salary increases for county clerks that participate in continuing education, which incentivizes clerks to attend the monthly training and conferences.

This network results in a closely knit community. Retired clerks regularly attend conferences, and veteran clerks assist newcomers. When natural disaster strikes or an office finds itself short-handed, clerks rally to help their peers by moving equipment, processing documents to reduce backlogs, or stepping in wherever needed.

The association also retains a contract lobbying firm—with former Secretary of State Trey Grayson serving as the lead lobbyist—to represent its interests before the General Assembly. Clerks regularly leverage their own relationships with legislators, especially leadership and relevant committee chairs, to make their cases, often communicating directly via text when need be. In the past few years, the association has developed a reputation for being solution-oriented and willing to work with legislators on relevant legislation, a change from its past reputation. While the association does not always get what it wants, it now commands a more influential seat at the table than in the past, when it was primarily known for working to block legislation.

Pennsylvania: 67 Counties, Two Associations

Pennsylvania has two election associations, with the Eastern Association representing the 36 eastern counties and the Western Association representing the 31 western counties.

Each association has two meetings annually: one after the primary election (May/June) and one after the general election (early December). Every year, the two associations come together in early August for an educational commonwealth-wide meeting. Although counties in each association have opinions on legislation, issues they would like to see the Department of State address, and other matters, the associations themselves do not lobby as a collective or appoint a person to do so. Instead, a separate organization, the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, has a specialized Elections Reform Committee that advocates for election-related legislation on behalf of counties.

Absent collective advocacy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's county election directors cannot effectively influence the state legislature on needed reforms to election administration, beyond contacting their individual representatives. Consequently, lawmakers often draft election-related legislation without input from election directors, who are only consulted on technical issues during the final stages of passage. Rather than shaping policy early in the legislative process, directors' influence is limited to making flawed reforms workable, as opposed to advocating for what is best—or desired—at the county level where elections are actually run.

Florida: Association-Created Training Provides More than Expected

In Florida, supervisors of elections are charged with conducting and administering all federal, state, and county elections within their jurisdiction (county). They are represented by a statewide association, the Florida Supervisor of Elections. Currently, all 67 jurisdictions are members, although membership is not required. All member jurisdictions pay yearly dues at the rate of 2% of the supervisor's annual salary, as calculated by the State of Florida's Office of Economic and Demographic Research.

Additionally, the association created a nationally recognized certification program, Florida Certified Election Professionals (FCEP). The program consists of 30 courses held throughout the state several times a year. The classes are open to supervisors, their staff, and other Florida public officials responsible for elections, with an enrollment fee charged for each class. Originally intended to at least fiscally sustain itself, the program has become a major generator of revenue due to the overwhelming popularity of its courses. To ensure no jurisdiction is left behind, the association offers scholarship opportunities to support some of Florida's fiscally constrained jurisdictions. Through membership dues and the FCEP program, they are able to hire a professional association administering team, which includes a dedicated lobbying position.

Lessons from the States

Taken together, the Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania examples point to the same practical conclusion: Strong associations do not all need to look alike, but they do need sufficient structure, resources, and credibility to meet the needs of their members.

Colorado underscores the value of supporting those smaller and more remote members who would otherwise be unable to participate. Florida shows how a well-designed training and certification program can build professional capacity while generating sustainable revenue. Kentucky demonstrates how regular training, peer communication, incentives, and constructive advocacy can give local officials a stronger voice with policymakers. Finally, Pennsylvania illustrates the limits of educational convenings alone when associations lack statewide policy capacity or a clear funding path.

Ultimately, all four states demonstrate that modest investments in governance, staffing, training, and sustainable funding can yield statewide benefits in consistency, professionalism, and operational resilience.

Potential Pain Points—and How to Address Them

Efforts to strengthen state associations should include clear guardrails to preserve trust, nonpartisanship, and transparency. Common concerns and practical mitigations include:

- **Concern:** added workload for administrators.
  Mitigation: hire professional staff to handle logistics, use templates and shared services to reduce overall workload, and set clear, limited expectations for volunteer leaders.
- **Concern:** perception of partisanship or advocacy capture.
  Mitigation: adopt bylaws and ethics policies emphasizing nonpartisan

administration, balanced governance, transparent positions grounded in operational impact, and clear separation between education/training and lobbying activities.

- **Concern:** unequal influence across jurisdictions.
  Mitigation: establish governance models that protect variation in jurisdictions without giving any single type of jurisdiction inequitable power (such as regional representation, weighted voting safeguards, or rotating leadership) and provide participation support.
- **Concern:** funding limitations.
  Mitigation: provide sufficient funding support so that election administrators can pay membership dues, conference registration fees, and meeting travel costs.
- **Concern:** funding restrictions.
  Mitigation: diversify revenue streams through dues, conference revenue, and grants/sponsorships where permitted; maintain clear budgets; conduct annual independent financial review; demonstrate documented member value; and establish clear statutory directives that allow association governance to benefit from philanthropic and other forms of funding support.
- **Concern:** lack of time or capacity to engage in association.
  Mitigation: build community while offering financial or other incentives, such as Kentucky's law that provides salary incentives for participation.

Recommendations and Next Steps

1. **Define the value proposition.** Specify the association's core services (training, peer networks, resource library, statewide communication, and/or advocacy) and detail how they will reduce the burden on local offices.
2. **Strengthen governance and nonpartisan safeguards.** Update bylaws, clarify membership and leadership criteria, and adopt clear ethics/transparency policies.
3. **Fund a minimum viable staff model.** Start with part-time executive director/administrator capacity and scale as membership and revenue grow.
4. **Lower barriers for small jurisdictions.** Use regional trainings, virtual options, and targeted participation support.
5. **Measure and communicate impact.** Track training participation, member satisfaction, onboarding support to new administrators, and operational improvements tied to shared resources.
6. **Participate in the Coalition of Election Association Leaders.** Join the national network of associations, a project of Election Center.

Investing in state associations is a practical, near-term way to strengthen election administration without reinventing the system. Associations help ensure that professional knowledge travels faster than turnover, good practices reach every corner of a state, individual relationships are leveraged for collective benefit, and administrators have the training and peer support needed to deliver accurate, secure, and trusted elections.

Selected Resources for Further Reading

Coalition of Election Association Leaders (CEAL), Election Center: association governance support and networking

Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC): elections advocacy resources

The Elections Group: training and support programs

Journal of Election Administration, Research & Practice (JEARP), Election Center: peer-reviewed research and practitioner knowledge-sharing for election administration

Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL): technology tools for improving voter communication and election services

More Perfect: materials on civic learning, discussion resources on trusted elections, responsive governance, and democratic renewal, including a specific project focused on ensuring fair, credible and trustworthy elections

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