Oregon County Election Staffing Research Study

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Executive Summary and Key Findings

Oregon has long led the nation in electoral reform and performance. The state has implemented a series of first in the nation practices, such as voting by mail and automatic voter registration, which have since been adopted by other states. This spirit of innovation and access has set Oregon apart.

At the heart of this system are local election offices in 36 counties where voters are served by County Clerks, election directors, and their teams. These local election officials balance a series of competing demands, often operating on lean budgets and with tight staff. These offices work closely with political candidates, elected officials, special districts, and other political organizations to ensure access to the ballot and provide information these organizations seek to inform and mobilize citizens. These offices inform and educate the public about voting rules and procedures, and field myriad requests about how elections are conducted in Oregon. And, of course, Oregon County Clerks, election directors, and their staffs guarantee the central promise of American democracy: citizen voice and influence via the ballot.

The past two decades, particularly the past two years, have called attention to the critical role local election offices play in sustaining and supporting a responsive and trustworthy democratic system. Many local offices are at a breaking point. Staff and budgets are not just "lean" but inadequate to a new and complex set of tasks and expectations. Far too many election officials and staff are subject to abuse, threats, and harassment (Clark et al. 2023, Gronke and Manson 2022). As a consequence, local election offices have experienced a wave of retirements, resignations, and loss of expertise, and it isn't clear how this expertise will be replaced.

Oregon may be protected from some of these trends because the vote-by-mail system is robust, secure, and well-understood by Clerks, voters, and other political actors. The state has been consistently in the top 10 in voter turnout and, since the implementation of automatic voter registration in 2016, in the top rank for voter registration as well.[1] At the same time, Oregon is not immune to national trends, and the State of Oregon has some unique challenges of its own. Politics in Oregon has become increasingly polarized, mirroring the national polarization. Economic change and disruption meant that some areas of the state have grown and thrived while others have seen a decline in local revenue streams. This has been more pronounced for those counties who traditionally relied on timber and other natural resources. And change – always a constant in the elections space – seems to be even more rapid and unpredictable.

[1] Rankings are from 2020 and were obtained from the MIT Election Data Science Lab (MEDSL). Oregon data available at https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/map?view=state-profile&state=OR&year=2020

In order to better understand these challenges, the Elections Division of the Oregon Secretary of State's office commissioned this study to assess the staffing challenges faced by local election officials. This report summarizes the findings from this study. This study interviewed election officials from **34 of Oregon's 36 counties.** These interviews averaged between 60 to 90 minutes long. Oregon Clerks and election directors provided a combined 46 hours of interviews for this project.

For each county, the research team interviewed either the County Clerk, the director of elections or a delegated official. The interviews focused on the evolving nature of election administration in Oregon, and the staffing challenges that these offices face. Additionally, staffing discussions require exploring funding and budget changes, as well as anticipated changes to election rules. Inevitably, however, our interviewees veered from the script. They shared with us the pride, honor, and job satisfaction they felt as "stewards of democracy." They also shared concerns about workload, staffing, and rapid change. Supporting and sustaining local election officials and their staff must be a top priority in Oregon.

Key Findings

- Staff recruitment and retention is a challenge for many Clerks and election directors, but for diverse reasons. In some cases, job classifications and compensation have fallen out of sync with the position's expectations. In other cases, external forces, such as economic downturns or lack of viable housing stock and rentals make it difficult to recruit and retain competent staff.

- Staffing levels today are below what they were a decade ago in most offices, even as the demand placed on these offices has increased. Staff cuts are accelerating in 2023 and will likely impact the 2024 election cycle. In most cases, staff reductions were a consequence of budgetary pressures caused by changes in income from recording fees or other budgetary pressures. Technology solutions that may help manage elections with a declining workforce are not available in most medium and smaller sized counties.

- The level of public records requests has exploded in every office, creating new and unexpected demands. There appears to be little standardization in how these requests are responded to and whether the level of requests is being recorded and tracked.

- Training and workforce development was a high priority for many Clerks. Many expressed satisfaction with training programs provided by the Oregon Association of County Clerks (OACC), but some shared a lack of resources or time to be able to attend biannual meetings.

- Job satisfaction and personal reward from elections work remain high among Oregon Clerks. At the same time, many Clerks reported high levels of stress and burnout. The current corrosive political environment is taking a serious toll on elections offices, and many reported a desire to leave the profession.

Overview of Elections Offices in Oregon

Oregon's counties are charged with conducting elections for local,[2] state, and federal races. These offices also maintain the voter registration data, conduct election audits, support local governments in preparing for and administering elections, and conduct political party leadership elections. Despite a common set of rules and requirements, each county varies by organizational design and budget resources. Counties are the key unit responsible for conducting elections, and these are administered by a single office in each county. Voter registration in Oregon is unified at the state level through a centralized voter registration system, with data maintenance performed by county officials.

Election offices in Oregon come in a variety of organizational and staff configurations. An initial source for this diversity flows from how counties are organized in Oregon. The first key distinction is whether a county has adopted Home Rule through a charter election. Under an amendment to the Oregon Constitution in 1958, voters were granted the choice to adopt charters for their counties, allowing them to reorganize their structure and functions more broadly. The key distinction for elections is how the local election official is chosen. For general law counties (those that have not adopted Home Rule), the chief local election official is the elected County Clerk. This position is also often referred to as the constitutional Clerk as their authority flows directly from the Oregon Constitution not local charter or law. The duties and services Clerks provide are defined in statute and include the administration of elections, the recording of real property transactions, issuing and recording marriage licenses, maintaining certain county documents and proceedings notes, and serving as the board of property tax appeals. Clerks in some counties also keep probate records, serve as passport agents for the U.S. Department of State, and in some cases manage accounting and payroll services for their counties. These additional services vary largely based on the size of the county, but also represent a key source of diversity across counties.

In the nine counties that have adopted Home Rule,[3] the chief local election official varies. Some Home Rule counties have maintained an elected Clerk while others have created a Director of Elections or similar appointed or civil service position. One Home Rule county has merged the Clerk and Assessor role into a single staff position. For Home Rule counties without an elected Clerk, the elected oversight of elections is conducted by the county commission.

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[2] "Local" includes many different governmental entities, including towns and municipalities, counties, regional governments, ports, and a wide variety of special service districts.

[3] Nine counties have adopted "home rule" charters, wherein voters have the power to adopt and amend their own county government organization. Lane and Washington were the first to adopt "home rule" in 1962, followed by Hood River (1964), Multnomah (1967), Benton (1972), Jackson (1978), Josephine (1980), Clatsop (1988) and Umatilla (1993). Source: Oregon Blue Book 2023-2024.

Office Duties, Structure and Staffing

Elections are administered from a diverse set of office and organizational structures. In smaller counties the Clerk's Office might be the elected Clerk and one or two staff members. These offices tend to have a broad set of duties that are shared across the team. Elections are administered alongside recording property transactions, issuing marriage licenses, issuing dog licenses, keeping the records of the county court or commission, and even keeping track of mining claims. Many offices also serve as the ethics commission for their county. Clerks in smaller counties are also more likely to support probate functions performed by the county court. Additionally, all Clerks in Oregon also serve as the Board of Property Tax Appeals. Some of these offices also manage accounts payable and payroll for the county.

Moving up in size, the medium sized counties might dedicate a single staff member to work on elections year-round. In these offices the Clerk oversees all the duties in the office, but often works closely with the dedicated election staff member, especially in the period between candidate filings and certifying the election. Other staff in these medium sized offices may be cross-trained to support elections. This cross-training might include assisting voters that come to the counter or call on the phone or helping with producing ballots on demand as needed. Otherwise, the other staff are primarily dedicated to other services. Several counties did share being more integrated, where two to three staff members rotate duties between recording and elections or are split evenly each day between both sides of the Clerk's Office. This configuration is rare, but it was noted to be a resilient option to allow for team members to cover each over for leave or training needs.

For larger counties, the structure varies more because the head of elections may be an elected Clerk or a senior administrative position. For those with elected Clerks, election offices are usually led by a deputy position who supervises a small team dedicated to elections. For offices where there is no elected Clerk, and the duties are assigned to staff positions, we see more variation too. Directors of election offices may be located at different levels of the county structure, in some cases reporting directly to county administrators, or alternatively reporting to another department head. This structure can impact the level of attention or support election offices receive. These larger offices may have teams of six to 12 employees and operate in a dedicated space. These larger offices do not have to balance the diverse set of duties that small and medium sized offices are required to provide.

During our interviews, we asked each office to share their elections staffing levels. For some offices, this is an easy question because they have dedicated election teams separated from other duties associated with the Clerk's Office. In other counties, Clerks have decided to integrate team members across the numerous services provided, allowing for recording staff and election staff to overlap and cross-train. Despite these differences, we did ask them to try and estimate the number of staff equivalents that are dedicated to elections.

The range in staff size varies primarily based on the size of the jurisdiction. The smallest offices have either only a fraction of a position allocated or none at all. The largest offices are as large as nine to 12 people. These totals only include permanent staff, and in some cases proportions of positions are included if the staff member serves both recording and election functions. To help with comparisons, across Oregon each staff position serves on average 27,000 voters. In the least populated counties this ratio is as low as 1,000 voters. For smaller staff teams with larger total registered voters, the ratio can be as high as 63,000 voters per staff member. For medium sized counties, with between 5,000 and 100,000 registered voters, the staffing ratio is closer to 25,000 voters, but with some notable variation. In these totals we did not include the Clerk or election director.

Table 1 shares the summary of staffing levels we learned about in our interviews. Small counties are those with 5,000 total registered voters or less as of January 2023. Medium counties are those with between 100,000 and 5,000 total registered voters, and large counties are those with 100,000 or more. Six counties are in the large category including Clackamas, Deschutes, Jackson, Lane, Multnomah, and Washington Counties.

	Full-Time Staff Counts			Voter to Staff Ratios		
County Size	Average	Maximum	Minimum	Average	Maximum	Minimum
Large	6.7	12.0	2.5	46,914	63,971	30,364
Medium	1.7	5.8	0.1	25,015	73,760	2,126
Small	1.0	1.0	1.0	1,322	1,460	1,075
Overall	2.7	12.0	0.1	27,433	73,760	1,075

Table 1: Staffing Levels and Voter to Staff Ratios

For smaller and medium sized offices, we have consistently heard that staffing levels today are at or below levels from five to 10 years ago. These staffing levels have not changed despite great increases in total registered voters following the implementation of automatic voter registration in Oregon. Adding voters to the rolls results in increased calls for assistance during elections. This is further exacerbated as newly registered voters are often non-affiliated voters and are unsure why they are receiving primary ballots that may not include the party they had thought they were registered with. Finally, smaller and medium sized offices told us they were unable to put in place technology and automation that may help manage these higher voter flows. Many of the automation solutions (e.g., ballot openers and sorters; computerized signature verification) are not cost-effective for counties with fewer than 50,000 voters or appropriately sized equipment is not yet available.

Compensation and Classification

Pay and compensation were reported as a frequent challenge for hiring and keeping election staff. Clerks noted that they competed with other departments in their own counties to retain staff. Notably, several Clerks shared that jobs in their office might share similar tasks and responsibilities with those in the Assessor or Sheriff's office, and that those departments were able to pay more. These internal challenges to counties were often tied to issues of job classification. Many election office positions have either not been reviewed in a position or compensation analysis, or if they have been, the review treated them as more clerical positions. This is despite the important legal and regulatory obligations required by these positions. In one case, a recent staffing review by an outside consultant was conducted during an election season. Due to conflicts in time and staffing, the elections team in this county was unable to fully participate in the study, resulting in a missed opportunity to reclassify positions appropriately.

Some Clerks shared success in reclassifying positions if they could connect them to a parallel effort in another office. One Clerk shared they were able to partner with their Sheriff's office and co-develop a new job classification to be shared by both offices. This allowed the position to be defined as a technical specialist rather than an administrative title.

Clerks themselves also face pay challenges in these studies. While none of the Clerks participating in our study shared direct concerns about their own compensation, it was noted that in relation to other county elected offices, the Clerk's position is often lower paid than other elected offices, and sometimes paid less than chief administrative positions that are not elected. One Clerk attributed this to how compensation studies were conducted and how comparisons were made for the role of Clerk. Though this was not uniform across Oregon, another Clerk shared that their county chose to standardize elected officer pay regardless of position.

On a more positive note, a number of Clerks mentioned that the benefits (e.g., health care, retirement) of a county position attracted applicants, especially in comparison to positions in those portions of the economy that are more subject to economic cycles. By example of this, we noticed quite a few Clerks, and staff members, transitioned into elections and recording work from the real estate sector.

Changing Nature of the Work

Many Clerks and election directors noted that the changing nature of conducting elections has created new hiring challenges. New rules and new technology have made the work of elections far more complex. For larger counties, we heard the need for dedicated technology specialists, staff trained specifically in IT or other technological tools that support the election process. For smaller counties, this presents a challenge when staff sizes may only be two people, and dedicating a position is not an option.

Additionally, many offices shared that outreach, public engagement, and voter education are priorities for new hires. One Clerk noted that hiring now needs to include public engagement skills to address concerns from misinformation or disinformation. New hires need to be able to demonstrate tally systems or other election equipment and be comfortable in front of more adversarial public engagements. While some smaller offices may engage in voter outreach and education through face-to-face communications, medium and larger sized offices need to be able to take advantage of social media and other channels. These changes mean the positions are no longer entry-level – new hires must be ready to be in the spotlight from the first day.

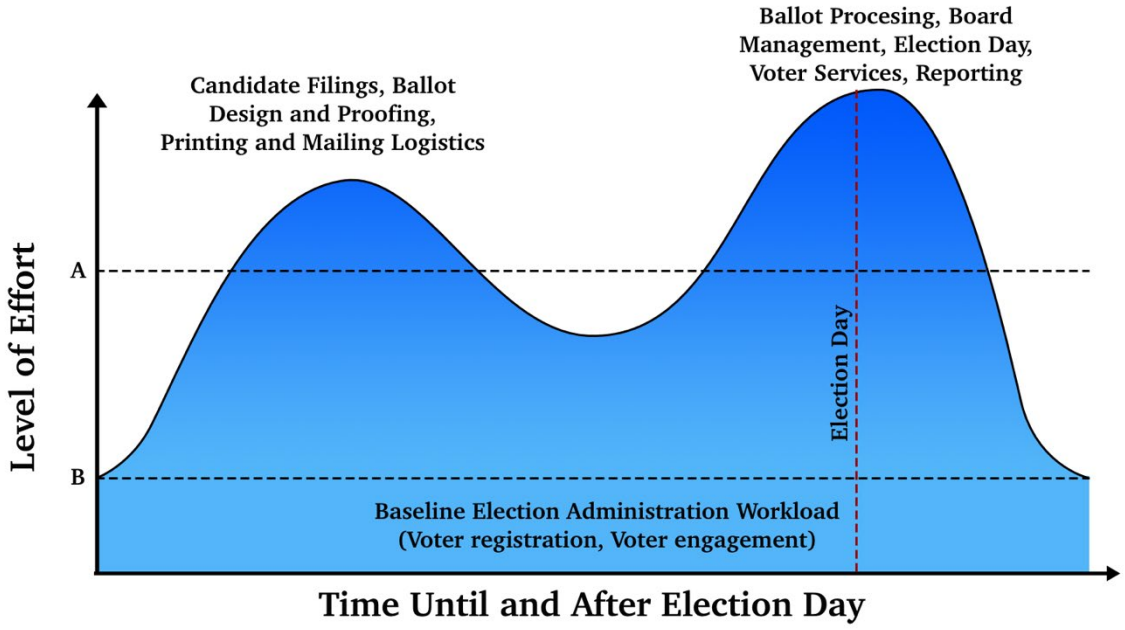

Figure 1: General Model of Election Workload

Another source of change is the election cycle itself. We asked offices to share when the peak of election activity occurs, and most responded that the peak is increasingly long. In fact, many shared that there is rarely a down period at this point. Generally, the peak of election activity starts with candidate filings, about 100 days prior to the election, and then tapers off two to three weeks after the election. This means that the active election season is approximately four months long. There are periods where the intensity of the work slows during this election period. In even-numbered years, this means there are at least eight months of intense election work.

Figure 1 graphically presents this workload dynamic in a general schematic. There is variation across jurisdictions, but workloads generally peak twice during any given election. The first intense period involves candidate filings; developing, proofing, and printing ballots; and coordinating with mailing houses to start sending ballots to voters. After ballots are sent, the period of intense work drops somewhat, until ballots start to return. Many shared

the second peak begins with hiring temporary workers and boards to process incoming ballots. This second peak takes off as Election Day approaches and the level of effort is dedicated to processing ballots; voter engagement at the front counter and in communities, followed by Election Day activities which include tabulation, reporting, and post-election processes which include ballot curing; auditing, and additional reporting.

The figure also shares two lines, "A" and "B." The line "B" represents the baseline level of election administration effort required year-long. This includes voter registration updates, voter engagement, and recently the many public records requests that have been received. The second line, labeled "A," represents times when the level of effort exceeds the normal working hours. The peaks of workload in these periods require election officials and workers to stay late into the night, work over weekends, or come in earlier than planned.

Some labor savings have been realized via new technologies. Several offices reported that the shift to online voter information since the adoption of the Oregon Centralized Voter Registration (OCVR) system has simplified staff tasks around registration (but using these systems may require comfort with sophisticated computer systems). They noted that the processing of paper cards took far more time, though others noted the sheer volume of automatic voter registrations via the Motor Voter law might be offsetting this savings. Offices also shared apprehension about the potential impacts of the new Oregon Votes system that will replace OCVR – and if this change will impact staffing resources and require a new cycle of learning and adaptation.

A number of medium and smaller sized counties reported that they are unable to take advantage of technology and automation that may result in labor savings and other efficiencies, because these solutions are only practical for counties with more than 50,000-75,000 registered voters. For example, existing ballot sorters are not sized nor priced well for smaller jurisdictions, suggesting there is a segment of jurisdictions that technology might benefit, but that is not served by vendors and technology providers in the marketplace.

Recruitment

Most offices shared persistent challenges during recruitment for new hires. Many shared that applicant pools often only had one qualified candidate, or none at all, requiring searches to remain open. Sources for these challenges were many. Some offices noted that they are unable to compete with other local employers, whether they were timber companies or new high-tech employers in the county. In some cases, election staff are at or close to minimum wage levels, with one office noting that local fast-food employers can pay more than the county.

Offices had mixed experiences with the human resources offices in their counties. In some cases, these relationships are fruitful and supportive, but in other cases, Clerks felt that the offices did not fully understand the mix of qualifications, demands, and stressful

political environment surrounding elections. In these more challenging situations, job classifications or reclassifications were seen as out of sync with the actual work performed.

One missed opportunity may be how benefits are advertised or shared with potential applicants. Benefits packages and work schedules at election offices are often much better than competing employers, but applicants do not seem to be aware of this. One Clerk shared a particularly hard challenge. In a search for two open positions 14 applicants were screened, and only seven were qualified. After interviews, two candidates emerged to fill the two positions but after offering the candidates the job the individuals backed out due to pay. The applicants had demanded $18 per hour, but the position was only able to pay $14. This office shared they hope to request an increase in starting pay to $17 per hour but are uncertain if the request will be successful.

Another recruitment challenge is the nature of the work itself and public perceptions of election offices. Many offices shared that the work of elections requires being comfortable with a dynamic and changing environment. Some staff who attended interviews noted they personally enjoyed the variety and excitement of elections work but noted that it was a barrier for hiring. Offices noted that many applicants sought slower types or work or were not able to manage the ambiguity of the work environment. In some cases, this meant offices had gone through several staff members as they were hired, trained, and then the new hire realized the fit was not appropriate for them. Several Clerks also shared that the political environment around elections has become a barrier. Some applicants have experienced harassment or targeted scrutiny of these offices and are unwilling to put themselves in that work environment.

Offices also shared challenges in finding qualified applicants. Positions might be listed for a month or more and only receive five to six applicants. From these only one or two would appear qualified, and even then, require extensive training as election experience is rare outside of the larger jurisdictions where movement between offices is more likely. One larger jurisdiction in the Willamette Valley shared that fewer than half of applicants to positions are qualified. Hiring also presented new risks for some offices. One office shared a concern that the hiring process that is required by their human resources office is disconnected from the environment of mistrust around elections. Under the current hiring processes, it is more difficult to personally assess an applicant's motives for working in elections. This could result in applicants with intents to potentially interfere with elections being hired for temporary positions (election boards, temporary workers). In this example, standard hiring application materials or questions failed to assess the real intentions of applicants. More broadly, a number of counties expressed a concern that human resources offices did not fully understand the needs of the election offices.

Not all counties experienced recruitment challenges. Some offices said they were comfortable with the lack of experience and preferred to hire the right person and develop their skills on the job. Some of these Clerks that enjoyed developing talent also noted luck had played a vital role in finding the right person.

Many offices also shared that local housing markets presented a recruitment barrier. These offices noted that because of high housing costs, they could only reasonably recruit from workers that already live in the area. Applicants from out of county or out of state are harder to recruit with high housing costs. This housing challenge was not limited to just the urban areas or fast-growing regions, but also to rural counties of all sizes.

Finally, in our discussions with many jurisdictions it was noted that staff were all moving towards retirement at a similar pace. While we did not directly ask about age or demographics, the message here was that the cadre of current election administrators is generally approaching retirement age in many jurisdictions and that succession planning is a challenge. Recruitment of a younger generation of election workers is more critical in light of this trend.

Training and Development

One consistent message across all offices is that training for elections is complicated. Most offices shared the same message: It takes four years to be fully trained in election tasks. Four years is the interval because that period of time spans all types of elections a staff member needs to experience. One office shared this dynamic in very real terms:

> *Because, you know, it really takes two to four years before you really have seen elections. It's an event that happens very infrequently, but it takes a lot of preparation and learning, and I think we could, we could do tabletop exercises all day long, and it doesn't really, you know, prepare you for having a line [of voters] down the block.*

Most offices did not have formalized training programs or initiatives, most used mentoring and on-the-job training to develop the skills in their offices. But training in-house or on-the-job training is not without costs. One Clerk noted, “So what I had been doing when I brought other people in is I would try to work with them during the day, and then come in after hours to get the regular work done.” One office shared that recent turnover in a number of positions was extremely challenging. With so many people to train, but also with so many fewer experienced hands, the pace of work was inhibiting the ability of the office to train their new people. This office hopes to make a large training budget request for the next year, but this request is in conflict with the needs of other parts of the office.

The OACC meetings were cited by many as a key resource for training. However, for smaller offices these meetings are hard to attend either because of a lack of travel budget or because staff sizes are too small to have an additional staff member cover the office while others are at the OACC meetings. OACC membership fees were cited as a barrier for some offices, which cost approximately $350 per staff member. The OACC membership is also organized into regional zones. Many, notably in Eastern Oregon, shared that their zone members were amazing sources of support and learning. Zones provided a more direct connection to OACC for these members than the statewide meetings.

A barrier for training or cross-training also appears to be just the time and other competing priorities required to develop in-house training. Offices that have strong key personnel who have been in elections for a long time are often so effective it is hard to pause and create opportunities for them to teach others or document their processes. Yet many offices recognized that they have benefited from an extended period of competence in their office and a future need will be to capture that institutional knowledge and develop a mechanism for passing it on to new hires.

Some offices noted that previously the Secretary of State's office provided more training opportunities for new and existing staff. These Clerks shared that these opportunities are no longer available, but some have been replaced with OACC trainings. We were told that in the early 2000's the state led more coordinated training efforts, but that those options are no longer available. The specifics of what these previous trainings were was not immediately shared in interviews. One office shared a concern that inconsistent training across the state creates a space for bad actors to charge malfeasance if interpretations or practice start to differ in substantial ways. It was also noted this might be part of a broader trend in the state cutting back on training for roles it oversees. The Department of Revenue was noted as an example where training for counties has been reduced or eliminated, impacting the recording side of offices.

One area that was a strong point for a few counties was cross-training of staff across all tasks in the office. Several offices noted that recording staff were trained to backfill election staff as needed for either time out of office or due to surges of activity during elections. This was not a common strategy across offices, but those that shared it noted its critical importance. Some offices shared a desire to expand cross-training but noted that it would require more people on staff to be sustainable. Some also noted that the lack of supervisors presents some challenges. Having all staff overseen by one supervisor means that all decision making or performance review flows through one person, creating a bottleneck potentially for staff improvement. A lack of supervisors also increases the workload on the supervisors that remain – competing with other job-related duties. One office even cross-trains staff from outside the Clerk's Office to be ready to help during election periods. One office shared they had come to a point where the staff rotate daily or weekly across duties in the Clerk's Office to stay proficient on all the tasks.

Budget and Resource Challenges

In Oregon, while the county administers elections for local, state, and federal races and measures, with few exceptions, it bears almost all the costs of administering these elections. Counties can seek reimbursement for elections from special districts and from municipalities when elections fall off cycle, such as with special elections. But notably, municipal, state, and federal elections are financed entirely by county resources. Some offices raised concerns that they are obligated to run elections for the major political parties with no option for reimbursement. These costs have become a unique challenge. While Oregon law requires that the costs of elections be borne by county general fund, in practice

many counties rely upon recording fees from real property transactions to support elections.

Clerks, with their dual recording and election administration roles, allow for these services and funds to be combined in smaller offices. The challenge is that recording fees are driven by the level of real estate transactions in a county. In years with increasing home prices, and low interest rates, the volume of property sales and mortgage refinancing generates enough revenue on the recording side of the Clerk's Office that the elections can be funded entirely by recording fees in larger counties. However, when housing starts and refinancing declines, as it did after 2008 and has done in the past six months because of the sudden increase in interest rates, recording activity can drop precipitously.

For one Oregon county, this reduction in activity has resulted in a $600,000 budget shortfall requiring staff layoffs in the past month. Many other counties shared in the interviews that their ability to replace staff, support personal and staff development by, for instance, traveling to professional conferences or taking training courses, or consider new technological solutions to improve the operations of their office is not possible because of the drop-in recording fees. In essence, our election system is dependent on the vagaries of the housing market, interest rates, and economic forces beyond our borders.

Broader county public finance challenges also confront election administration in Oregon. The lasting effects of Measure 50 have left a permanent mark on formerly timber reliant counties. At the time of the passage of Measure 50, some counties relied heavily on timber receipts for county revenues and thus these counties had low property tax rates. With the passage of Measure 50, these tax rates were converted to permanent tax rates forever locking counites into a public finance reality that no longer exists. This legacy continues to erode local finance options. For one county we interviewed, the shift from timber receipts to various federal programs has created an uncertain revenue environment that recently resulted in six months of furlough to 80% pay for all employees that rely on the general fund, which included the entire Clerk's Office. Other counties that relied more heavily on property taxes in the mid-1990s did not suffer this impact. On the other side of the coin are a handful of Oregon counties that are experiencing sudden increases in property tax value driven by logistics centers, data center operations, and renewable energy facilities. It is important to note some offices wanted to be clear that county general fund resources were the only source considered in budgeting. These individuals wanted to share that in their counties, general funds are guaranteed for the administration of elections.

Space Challenges

Regarding budget issues, we heard from many jurisdictions that physical space was a key challenge. For some this was a lack of space to upgrade equipment to more efficient ballot sorters or storage. Others shared that they did not have adequate and secure space for ballot processing. These concerns included needing to move ballots from room to room, and through public walkways or even leaving buildings to access other levels. Often space challenges were tied to the age of county infrastructure. Those with older courthouses

shared the biggest challenges, where space was not designed for modern election administration. During election season these Clerks might move into conference rooms or unused spaces to repurpose for processing ballots. Many counties noted that the requirement to store ballots past their usual retention schedule due to pending lawsuits is stressing storage resources.

These space challenges represent an election security concern. Clerks noted the desire to be able to keep ballots in one common space for their full processing, and that movement out of rooms always presents a risk. Some interviews noted progress in hardening spaces or protecting them. These measures included the addition of bulletproofing materials to front counters or keypad or other credential tools to secure spaces.

Pressures, Challenges, and the Future of Election Administration in Oregon

Several key areas present challenges today and are sources of concern for the 2024 election. The first is the ongoing series of challenges from misinformation or doubts about the security of national elections. This challenge also includes a sharp increase in public records requests. Another source of challenges for county election offices is the rate and pace of change in election rules and laws. We have seen a steady period of electoral reforms and changes that have tested the limits of offices to keep pace. Many offices shared concerns about how to maintain this pace of change and the threats it might pose to their offices. Finally, another source of concern about the future is the ability for Clerks and their staff to personally weather this storm of public perceptions and changes. As we will share, these pressures have become exceedingly personal for many Clerks and their team – to the point some no longer publicly share that they work in elections for fear of reactions from their neighbors and the public.

Public Perceptions and Public Records Requests

Not surprisingly, all offices shared a spike in challenges related to misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (MDM).[4] The most measurable impact from MDM and the shifting political landscape is the increase in public records requests. All offices have experienced a sharp increase in these requests and have struggled with interpreting what they can, should or must do in the face of these requests. Offices shared that public records requests are of course not a new part of the work. In the past requests were common, but

[4] The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) provides the following shared definition on these key terms: "Misinformation is false, but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm. Disinformation is deliberately created to mislead, harm, or manipulate a person, social group, organization, or country. Malinformation is based on fact, but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate." To learn more visit: https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/mdm-incident-response-guide_508.pdf

also straightforward. Political campaigns, parties or the media might request basic reports or documents to help with their work.

The critical change in the current environment is a national network that develops records requests to utilize in various states. These new requests often involve requests for information that cannot and does not exist in a universal vote-by-mail state like Oregon. For instance, Clerks report requests for voting machine logs or polling place check-in lists. More problematic are requests for new types of information that offices may or may not have access to, and even if they have the information, how to access it and how to disseminate it in a way that honors the confidentiality of the ballot.

One common request statewide has been for cast ballot images and the cast vote record (CVR). Cast ballot images comprise the scanned images of each physical ballot cast in an election. These files can be massive data products with storage costs implications. They can also include personal identifiers of voters, in cases where voters have added their name or address to the ballot itself. The cast vote record is essentially a file with zeros and ones that represent the choices made by a voter for all contests in an election. CVRs are distributed in some states (e.g., Tennessee) but are not commonly provided, and so constitute a new and potentially challenging request. The CVR can also reveal the identity of the voter in some unusual cases, such as a ballot style or precinct that is only used by a small number of voters who are likely to vote the same way.

Each election hardware and software system handles these functions differently. Some offices have not paid for the additional functionality to extract the images from an election. In these offices, some have interpreted public records law to mean they cannot fulfill the request. Other offices have determined they could charge for the cost of adding the functionality to their systems to satisfy the request, and therefore have quoted costs in the tens of thousands of dollars. Other offices were ready to produce cast ballot images and decided to make the image available immediately. Others noted that voters have included on their ballot personal identifiers such as their name or signature and felt that they were responsible for redacting these marks. A final set of offices believe there is no need to redact these as the voters made the choice to add the information to their ballots.

If this sounds confusing and contradictory, this is because different offices have different procedures for handling these requests, with highly varied levels of support by other offices or legal counsel. The concern is not that offices are being unresponsive (in some cases, they bend over backward to respond to every request). Rather, the concern is that these differences may inadvertently fuel distrust and reinforce false claims of misconduct.

Rate and Pace of Election Administration Change

Oregon has led the nation across various electoral improvements, notably universal vote by mail and automatic voter registration (AVR). Recently Oregon has extended the period for collecting ballots by paying for postage and allowing postage marks to be used for

casting ballots. These have been cited by many as new challenges that extend the election cycle without clearly showing the public how these changes have benefited the citizenry and improved election administration. For example, on one hand AVR added many citizens to the rolls, and some Clerks proudly pointed to increased turnout in their counties as a result. On the other hand, Clerks noted the increase in non-affiliated voters had created confusion during primary elections when new voters were concerned they had received the wrong ballot, or that they were surprised their information had been shared from a DMV transaction. Clerks generally felt that more effort could be made to promote the advantages that these changes have brought to Oregon's elections.

The rapid legislative changes were a concern expressed by many Clerks. Some noted that a series of rule changes have come down during election cycles or close to them creating undue stress. Recent changes to the formatting requirements and submission process for election security plans were shared as an example of a change that created hardship for many offices. The general sentiment was that the Clerks are ready to implement changes, but legislators need to recognize that change can take time, require new processes and procedures, and most importantly, can cost money that is seldom provided by the State.

Most offices shared concerns about the pace of change in the Elections Division of the Secretary of State's office. They understood why changes were occurring but many changes in personnel had resulted in more uncertainty around interpreting changing rules. Others noted that it was simply too hard to get a hold of anyone in the Elections Division, citing remote work as a barrier to access. Another source of concern shared was around the new Oregon Votes system. While there is optimism among many – reservations were shared about how the system would be implemented so close to the 2024 election with no real opportunity to test it on a lower stakes election. Some asked if the old OCVR system would remain as a redundant system or if it would be terminated when Oregon Votes is activated.

Clerks also shared widespread apprehension over proposed changes before the Oregon Legislature this session. Notably calls to return to in-person voting and ranked choice voting were cited as potentially catastrophic changes. A return to in-person voting would require the re-establishment of systems and procedures that have been lost over time. The costs associated with this change would challenge the sustainability of future elections without a massive change in funding and staffing models. Ranked choice voting proposals raised a series of nuanced and critical issues. Concerns centered around two aspects: costs and legitimacy. Offices shared that they anticipated huge cost increases to implement ranked choice voting (RCV). Many offices would need to replace election equipment and move to more expensive annual service contracts. Offices hinted that these costs for equipment and contracts could be over $100,000 annually. Others noted that RCV would require disposing of stockpiled mailing supplies to be replaced with larger and more expensive ballots. Postage costs would also increase.

However, the other concern may be the most challenging for RCV. Many Clerks shared that they feared the public's trust in elections is at a low point, and RCV could erode that trust. Perceptions that elections are opaque could only be made more challenging with RCV. A number of Clerks and directors thought that RCV would require a system for transmitting cast vote records for statewide or multi-county races to another entity (most likely the state office) to be tallied. There would no longer be county level returns for some offices, which could exacerbate mistrust of the elections because this could create confusion. These changes, which have not been discussed in the debate over RCV, could radically alter the relationship voters and campaigns have with county election offices, potentially further undermining public legitimacy of elections. It is important to note that a number of those interviewed were not opposed to RCV in principle, but rather worry that the risks and costs of the change may outweigh the benefits that a new system might bring.

Fundamentally, some offices raised the question why they need to continue to provide election services. While this was a small number of offices that shared this view, they raised a key question: can counties continue to play this critical role while funding is disconnected from new rule or policy changes? Administering elections at the county level has important benefits for maintaining close voter contact and engagement with the political parties. These frontline election workers bolster legitimacy through their face-to-face engagement. However, the financial and personal stresses of these elections are increasing and raising new questions.

The Personal Toll of Elections on Clerks and Staff

It is no secret that the work of election administration has become harder and more personal since 2018. National and local scrutiny has moved local election officials from behind their desks to in front of television cameras at a rapid pace. Public perceptions, information requests, and changing rules have all added to stress. One in five of our interviews required us to stop to allow participants to collect themselves after the emotional toll of this work bubbled to the surface of our interviews. In these emotional moments, the personal impact of our political environment on election staff was best captured by one office that shared the swirling increase in pressure. They must now prepare for active shooter events, they are armoring their front desks, they feel unsafe sharing their occupation in public, and they field endless calls questioning their work or intentions.

A disheartening number of Clerks and staff shared they were just holding on and debating whether they could continue, given this personal stress. Other Clerks shared with us that the increased demands and long hours may drive them from the profession. Another shared that during elections they must dedicate their whole self to elections and cannot be a caregiver and partner in their home. They shared that for two months they could be neither parent nor spouse and came home at midnight each day working for their county.

Let us be clear – most of our interviewees told us that they are proud of the work that they do. They frequently used words and phrases like "proud," "rewarding," "exciting" and "never a dull day." But for far too many, the positive features of the job no longer outweigh the long hours and corrosive political environment. More than one Clerk told us that if they had a "magic wand," they would change elections by taking the "politics out of politics." This Clerk knew this was not possible, of course, but many Clerks expressed emotions ranging from frustration, anger, and at times, tears, over the harsh and often personal rhetoric that seems to currently surround elections. This is a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

Recommendations

Institutionalize communications between the Division, the OACC, and counties. Many counties praised the Division of Elections and the Secretary of State for outreach and communications, especially efforts to regularly visit every county. At the same time, several Clerks expressed concern with irregular responses to communications and a feeling that local offices did not learn about legislative initiatives until they were well underway.

Create an Official OACC and Local Clerk Liaison. One method to improve communications would be to create a single point of contact for Clerks, staff, and the OACC by creating a county liaison within the Division of Elections office. This would not be a substitute for the Secretary or Election Director visiting counties or attending regional and statewide meetings, but it would be a person whose full-time job would be to act as an interface between counties, the state, and potentially the state legislature.

Development of a common training portfolio for election offices. Our research found that many offices rely on the OACC training courses as their primary training tool, while others expressed a desire to participate in these training courses but were unable due to financial considerations.

Expanding these trainings or developing new self-guided programs across all aspects of election administration can help reduce the need for each office to develop their own program. A collaborative effort across OACC zones for the entire membership might help standardize some practices in the state, allowing for more resource sharing and consistency.

Supporting access to training for counties unable to attend OACC conferences and training could reduce inequities between counties, improve election administration quality, and retain staff. One path may be a state-supported grant program, administered by the Division of Elections or by the OACC. Such a program would have the additional benefit of fostering informal communication networks not just between Clerks, but also between key staff members. Many in the field point to these informal networks as a way that election officials share expertise, anticipate problems, and support one another in stressful situations.

Standardize or potentially consolidate public records requests processes for various types of emerging public requests. Most if not all counties shared that the wave of public records requests after 2020 and 2022 involved new and often unclear requests. These requests were evaluated differently by each county through their county counsel or other resources. Differences in what can be released, the nature of the types of records that can be released, and the different costs associated with these requests may create a perception that not all counties are operating with the same assumptions. For example, some offices have interpreted Oregon law to allow requiring all requests to be submitted via a particular form. Others believe any request is valid. This differentiation is a potential source of conflict across counties and could be formalized with rule clarifications or potentially statutory changes.

> *Create a new statewide position in the Elections Division to support counties in addressing public records requests.* This position could help process statewide data requests or share best practices and tools for managing requests. We note that the Secretary of State's Office is already undertaking this with a 2023 budget request specifically for this type of position.
>
> *Encourage the use of intake forms for public records requests.* Forms could help to standardize these requests, reduce perceptions of inequity across counties, and improve record keeping so that the level, cost, and time burden of these requests is better understood.
>
> *Provide guidance on "boilerplate" or "cookie cutter" requests.* It is apparent that there is a national effort to flood election offices with public records requests, many of which ask for information that is not relevant (e.g., "voting machine logs," "polling place check-in lists"). The state office could support local offices by identifying these "cookie cutter" requests and providing a menu of responses for these types of requests.

Improve staff recruitment and retention Counties shared with us the ongoing challenge of recruitment when job classifications have fallen out of sync with the modern demands of working in elections and recording. Some counties reported that there had been recent compensation studies, or they had been able to get some jobs reclassified, but many others told us that pay and benefits were not competitive. While it is not possible to equalize the compensation levels across our diverse state, some steps can be taken to improve the situation.

> *Encourage statewide (and broader) advertisement of open positions.* While most offices are staffed by individuals who lived in the local community prior to their employment, there was significant variation in the recruitment channels used by election offices, and in many cases, by the human resources offices. There is little cost involved in distributing job ads more broadly, using common terms and job descriptions when possible.

Develop tools to screen and evaluate temporary workers or board members that can be shared as best practices. Counties shared some challenges in recruitment and screening of applicants. Sharing questions or practices used across counties in hiring temporary staff or those hired for boards can provide common best practices for counties to draw on. This may include the use of standardized intake questions or background checks.

Collect and disseminate compensation and job classification studies. Many counties shared with us compensation studies, in some cases conducted on a regular cycle, while others told us there have been no recent compensation studies. Some Clerks shared success stories of experiences with job reclassification. There is not much cost and potentially much gain by assembling and sharing the results of these studies and reclassification efforts. This would provide information to the OACC and local Clerks to support their discussions with their own counties.

Coordinate with statewide Human Resources offices. Working with counties and the OACC, share informational materials with human resources offices throughout the state, potentially organizing virtual gatherings, to share expertise and success stories and help HR officers understand the current political environment surrounding elections in their county and nationwide. The OACC may be a venue for these efforts.

Focus on recruitment to support succession planning for Clerks and election directors. Those that shared nearing retirement also often shared concerns about succession planning. Recruiting younger workers into election administration is critical to supporting succession planning and is an opportunity for increasing workforce diversity. Efforts to revisit job classification and compensation will help address these concerns.

Quantify and share the full costs of conducting elections across Oregon. While this study primarily focused on staffing, it became apparent during our research that there was substantial variation in the number of towns, cities, regional governments, and special districts that different counties are required to serve. These differences revealed themselves in how much effort the local office had to expend to engage with potential candidates and to design their ballots. For example, one Clerk in a rural county shared with us that there are 79 special districts in the county, and that the Clerk routinely must travel multiple hours to educate potential candidates on how to file for election. Another Clerk shared they had to repeatedly follow up with special districts to help them stay in compliance and remind them of state law around properly filing paperwork. Contrast this to Oregon's most urban counties, which have only a handful of special districts. The actual costs of administering elections remain opaque across this diverse state, and a comprehensive study of election costs would help planning and policy efforts and could educate election advocates about how much cost there is associated with some election

reforms. There was also a concern about fairness where special districts and local special elections are paid for by the local governments, but not other types of elections.

Study the need for improving and expanding physical space for election administration. Many counties shared security and storage challenges associated with spaces that are no longer functional for modern election administration. Others noted that the age of buildings presented challenges to securing the election process. A better understanding of the need for modern spaces for elections is needed, in light of these concerns.

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Appendix: Methodology

All Oregon Clerks were contacted by the research team over email, and in some cases via phone, offering an opportunity to participate in the research. We followed up multiple times to gain as complete a set of interviews as possible. The Division of Elections also assisted in this effort, encouraging Clerks to be interviewed. In fact, 34 of the 36 Clerks were interviewed by two researchers in sessions that ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Interviews began on December 12, 2022; the final interview was conducted on March 28, 2023. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in-person. We followed a standard interview protocol to improve comparability across the interviews.

County Elections Staffing Study Protocol

Introduction

The Election & Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed College in collaboration with the Oregon Secretary of State's office is conducting a study to understand the staffing needs of county election offices across Oregon. This research effort has been developed in collaboration with the Oregon Association of County Clerks membership.

Thank you for making the time to meet with our team. In advance of this interview, we would like to share some background and the topics we hope to explore in our meeting. The interviews should take 60-90 minutes, and we invite election offices to include any and all office staff that might help with understanding staffing needs in your office.

The following questions are an overview of the questions we will explore in the meeting. We like to share these in advance to help with understanding the purpose of the meeting. Also, at the end of this document is a worksheet we will use at the end to document staffing levels.

1) To begin our discussion, we would like to know more about you and your career experiences in elections. Can you please share your name, title, and how long you have been working in election administration.

Office Duties

2) As a part of our study, we seek to understand the level of effort your office dedicates to elections. What proportion of your office's work is dedicated to elections?

3) Next, we would like to explore the work your office does in addition to election administration. What other services does your office provide, or what other duties or tasks occupy your and your staff's time?

4) Thinking over your time in this office, how has your work changed? What new requirements, expectations, or duties have been added over time?

Staffing

5) Now that we have had a chance to explore the scope of your work, we want to shift to some questions on staffing needed to accomplish this work. We will start out with some questions about the type and number of positions in your office.

6) How many positions, if any, are funded by sources outside your county budget?

7) Next, we have developed a staffing worksheet to help with the next questions. Here we hope to identify the number of positions your office has by job type or classification, what their election and non-election duties are, and how many full-time employees are dedicated to each position.

8) For each of these positions, has recruitment or retention been a challenge?

Funding and Future Challenges

9) Looking ahead to the 2024 election cycle, what challenges in staffing does your office face? Looking ahead to the 2024 election cycle, what challenges in funding does your office face?

10) If there is one key change that could make your office more effectively achieve its work, what would that be?

11) If there is one new resource that could make your office more effectively achieve its work, what would that be?

12) Is there anything else we have not asked about that you feel we should also include in our study? Anything we missed in this conversation?

Also included with the email inviting you to this study is an Excel worksheet that guides collecting information on the positions in your office that are dedicated to elections. Feel free to complete it in advance of our interview or we can complete it as a part of the interview.