Pedagogical Value of Polling Place Observation By Students

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1 Mann, Alberda, Birkhead, and Ouyang prepared the manuscript. Singer ran the survey process and data management. Stewart, Mann, and Herron coordinated the Polling Place Lines Project. The remaining co-authors contributed by supervising the experiential learning opportunity and administering the learning assessment survey to their students. Financial support for this project was partially provided by the Democracy Fund, which bears no responsibility for the analysis. This paper was previously presented at the 2017 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting. We thank Barry Burden, Paul Gronke, Kathleen Hale and Thad Hall for helpful comments on earlier versions.
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I was really excited to gather data
because it made me feel like a real part of the democratic process.
~ student observer of polling places on Election Day 2016

Good education is comprised of both a societal purpose and an individual purpose (Dewey 1938). Instructors achieve both when student experiences contain immediate value to the student and encourages students to contribute to society. Kolb (1984) suggests that learning is enriched when students undergo experiences that compel them to become active participants. Political science courses often use active learning such as simulations, case studies, and role play to engage students (see Bromley, 2013). These activities produce desirable outcomes: increased interest, knowledge, and involvement (e.g. Alberda, 2016; Jimenex, 2015; Bridge, 2015).

Experiential learning extends ‘learning by doing’ beyond the classroom, enhancing the potential for both immediate value to students and contribution to society. This form of learning increases knowledge, raises interest in topics studied, and improves classroom engagement (Cole, 2003; Currin-Percival and Johnson, 2010; Lelieveldt and Rossen, 2009; Berry and Robinson, 2012) – Dewey’s individual purpose. Experiential learning involves skills needed as citizens and has a positive effect on civic engagement and efficacy (Maloyed, 2016; Mariani and Glenn, 2014; Delli Carpini and Keeter 2000) – Dewey’s societal purpose.

Experiential learning can bring abstract concepts to life in powerful ways and foster engagement in political processes; it transcends abstract knowledge and leads to meaningful participation in real world political activities. As instructors of political science, we know citizenship involves active participation, and participation in real world process distinguishes experiential education from active learning methods in the classroom. Engagement with political processes with real outcomes is important: individuals learn best when their emotions are involved in their experiences and when connections are cemented via repeated exposures (Berger 2015). Existing studies show that experiential learning provides students with opportunities to develop and enhance characteristics of citizenship that are important in a democracy (see Gershtenson et al. 2013; Mariani and Glenn, 2014; Maloyed 2016).
Our multi-campus experiential learning project meets both elements of Dewey’s definition of a good education. On November 8, 2016, faculty from twenty-three colleges and universities across the country organized more than 500 students, who observed the operation of polling places. Following Election Day, we surveyed students to assess the pedagogical impact of their experience. Our data indicate that student experiences were powerful and valuable, with positive impacts on short-term learning and continued interest in election processes. Experiencing the 2016 election first-hand increased student knowledge of election science topics, raised interest in learning more, and stimulated interest in participating in future research. Moreover, the collection of important and previously unavailable data about voting processes demonstrated the role of research in improving democracy.

Experiential learning can be tricky in political science, especially when it involves elections, because instructors cannot ask students to engage in political advocacy. Engaging students in field research about elections provides experiential immersion in the political process in an explicitly and thoroughly non-partisan manner. In our project, each student was trained on a detailed research protocol developed by Charles Stewart III, Christopher Mann, and Michael Herron to measure polling place lines, how long it took to vote, and other aspects of polling place operation. Participating faculty organized and trained students to make observations at polling locations in their areas. Many faculty used the research project as a platform for teaching research methods, elections science, or other related topics, and thus students were prepared for and invested in the field work in multiple ways. While our participating students did not turn election machinery themselves, the rigor, detail, and training in our research protocols prompted them to be broadly and deeply attentive to the 2016 election process and exposed them to locations, electoral processes, and people whom they might not otherwise encounter.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (2000) assert that, because engaging with real political processes increase students’ interest and opportunity to learn about politics, such experiences “could increase the likelihood of their continued engagement in public life” (636). An example is Gershtenson et al.’s (2013) experiential exercise in which students were tasked with registering to vote under scenarios that college students typically encounter. Gershtenson et al. found that students who sought to complete their registration processes found the voter registration process more difficult than they originally believed and became more sympathetic to those facing
registration problems. Thus, when students directly experience political processes, as opposed to simply reading, watching or hearing about them, such first-hand experience foster understanding and create empathy for others who find political processes challenging. Research that focuses on the act of voting, such as our study, should boost interest in citizen participation.

Moreover, studies on undergraduate research conclude that it fosters students’ critical thinking, logic, and problem solving skills (Knoll 2016). Herrick, Matthias, and Nielson (2015) argue that student-executed research makes learning more tangible, reinforces lessons by repeated practice, and motivates learning. Our project placed students in the field to collect data at polling locations on Election Day. This project provided students an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the research process; allowed them to interact with local communities; and connected observable political phenomena with the production of original data to better understand voting experiences. “Any class that involved field work…or direct engagement with the world outside the campus can engage students’ imaginations, creativity, energy, and even emotions in ways that make learning expand and endure” (Berger 2015).

Using students as field researchers provides multiple avenues for students to gain first-hand knowledge of the research process and the conduct of elections. “[H]ands-on experience in the field allow[s] students to synthesize acquired knowledge, practice it in the real-world setting, and reinforce the learning” (Herrick et al, 2015). Our project offered a tangible and repetitive experience for students as they visited multiple voting locations in the course of their field research experience. During their training, students learned about research design, how the voting experience could be affected by lines, and other aspects of election science. They then spent between two and twelve hours in the field where their experience became authentic and their task of data collection repeated.

Studies on student learning are usually singular in nature – one point in time, at one place, and focused on one type of student (see Alberda 2016; Jimenex, 2015; Bridge, 2015; Berry and Robinson, 2012). Our study is distinct from previous research on experiential learning in political science in three ways. First, it covers learning experiences across twenty-three institutions ranging from small colleges to major research universities, producing a larger data set than generally found in pedagogical research in political science. Second, our students ranged from first-year undergraduates to graduate students. Third, the students were in various locations
across the entire country, in urban, suburban, and rural settings. Our study thus reflects greater heterogeneity in research locations and student participants than in typical research settings.

**Research Method**

Our study follows previous research on experiential and active learning. Surveys of participants are an effective, and appropriate, approach to quantify the experience of students in active or experiential learning. Past pedagogical research has administered surveys after active or experiential learning activity as a means to examine student outcomes (see Alberda 2016; Ryan 2014; Gershtenson et al 2013). Using survey measures is valuable because it moves beyond anecdotal evidence and permits us to empirically measure students’ reaction to the fieldwork experience. A survey was also necessary for our study to measure quickly and consistently the impact on nearly 500 students at 23 campuses. The Institutional Review Boards of Skidmore College and Dartmouth College reviewed our study of the pedagogical value to students.\(^2\)

Our research assesses the pedagogical impact on students participating in the Polling Place Lines Project coordinated by Stewart, Mann, and Herron. The election science research questions of that project are detailed in Stein et al. (2017). Our research question focuses on whether the experience of observing polling locations on Election Day as part of a data collection process produced significant pedagogical value for the students.

We asked faculty participating in the 2016 Polling Place Lines Project to administer a survey to their students after Election Day. Faculty at twenty-three institutions agreed to participate. The survey team at Skidmore College provided an anonymous link to each participating institution through the online survey platform Qualtrics. Faculty at each institution then sent the survey link to their students.

The surveys were completed between November 10, 2016, and November 30, 2016, with 92% of the surveys completed in the week after Election Day. Each institution received a unique instance of the survey in Qualtrics to track response rates by institution. Identifying information about individual respondents was not collected, but to encourage survey completion faculty followed up with students via mass emails, classroom announcements, and other means. We

\(^2\) Skidmore College IRB #1610-558; Dartmouth IRB #STUDY00029937.
received 479 responses to the survey, resulting in an estimated cooperation rate of more than 90% of the eligible students.  

The full survey instrument is in the Supplemental Online Materials [SOM] and the key questions are detailed with the results below. The questions used in our survey are similar to those used by previous scholars evaluating experiential and active learning (see Maloyed 2016 and Jackson 2013).

**Who participated in the polling place observation experience?**

The participants in the polling place project were close to evenly distributed across the four undergraduate classes and graduate students: first year (21%), sophomore (19%), junior (22%), senior (21%), and graduate students (17%). A majority of students (56%) participated because it was required for class, especially undergraduates (63%). A quarter of students participated for extra credit. Three-fifths of the volunteers (64%) and “other” participants (58%) were graduate students.

Overall, student participants reported being well prepared for their fieldwork on Election Day (Figure 1). Fifty-two percent reported being well prepared, and 27% said they were very well prepared. Only 2% said they were not well prepared. This pattern is consistent for each of the four undergraduate cohorts and graduate students, indicating the sense of preparation was due to training and/or coursework provided during the fall of 2016.

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3 Among the respondents, 91% completed every item. Incomplete responses were retained in the dataset so some results do not add up to 479.
Assessment of learning

The survey asked students several questions to probe their self-assessment of Dewey’s individual purpose (i.e., the immediate value for the student). Overall, two-thirds of students said they learned a lot (13%) or a good amount (52%). Figure 2 shows that more advanced students, i.e. seniors (73%) and graduate students (74%), appear to report slightly more learning; variation across classes is not statistically significant (Pearson $\chi^2(12) = 13.03, p = 0.367$). More generally, three-quarters of participants considered the time they spent on the project to be very (24%) or somewhat (51%) valuable (see SOM Figure 2a). This is encouraging because time is a valuable commodity and spending time that is perceived as valuable on engagement in the voting process might spill over into other aspects of political life.
Among the 257 students who reported they were required to participate as part of a class, forty-seven percent reported the experience enhanced their understanding of course materials a lot (12%) or a good amount (35%) (see SOM Figure 2b). Another 39% reported that their experiences enhanced their understanding a small amount. Since election science was only a small part of many broad classes who participated (e.g., Introduction to American Politics, Campaigns & Elections, Voting Behavior, Research Methods), our question aimed at participating students who were required to work in our study should have been worded more carefully. With this caveat, the overall contribution to enhanced understanding of course materials seems encouraging.

At the end of the survey, students were given open-ended prompts to report the best part of the experience, worst part of the experience, and the most important thing they learned. Figures 3a-c are word clouds highlighting the most prominent terms in corresponding responses. Reflecting the pervasive human element of polling place operations and voting, “people” is highly prominent in responses to best, worst, and most important. As expected, terms related to the research project like “voting”, “election”, and “poll” also occur frequently in all three sets of responses. In the best part responses, the prominence of words like “seeing”, “observing”, 

Figure 2: How much would you say you learned from your Election Day experiences?

[Bar chart showing percentage of students who felt their understanding of course materials was enhanced by a lot, a good amount, a small amount, or very little. The categories are labeled as Very little, Small amount, Good amount, and A lot. The bars are color-coded for different academic years: First year, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, and Grad student.]

“watching”, “experience”, and “learning” indicate that students found the research task engaging. Unsurprisingly, the worst part responses highlight the downsides of field research in terms like “time” and “long hours,” along with references to “waiting”, “waking”, “sitting”, “standing”, and – of course – “boring”. Since one of the pedagogical goals was to increase appreciation for the research process, these terms can be taken as evidence of learning (and not just complaints). The most important lesson responses focus, as hoped, on terms like “people”, “vote”, “voting”, “lines”, and “process,” which highlights the societal and administrative dynamics associated with voting.

Figure 3a – Word cloud from “The best part of your experience”

Created with wordle.net. Limited to 75 key words.
We also asked students to compare their knowledge of eleven topics before and after their experiences.\(^4\) While retrospective self-reporting of change is an imperfect measurement of knowledge gain, this method is consistent with previous studies (Alberda 2016; Endersby and Weber 1995; Pappas and Peaden 2004). We believe the retrospective report is indicative of

\(^4\) In future iterations of the polling place line observation research we will survey participating students in advance of their training and Election Day experience, but unfortunately we did not do so in 2016.
engagement and increased efficacy, Dewey’s societal purpose. Moreover, our findings suggest greater perceived knowledge. These are valuable pedagogical outcomes even if it is less than ideal for capturing true knowledge gain. Figure 4 compares students’ knowledge before Election Day (gray bars) to their knowledge after the observation experience (black bars) on eleven topics. In every case, the post-experience distribution shifts to the right, away from knowing “very little” towards knowing “a lot.” After their experiences, students felt more knowledgeable about election science topics such as lines of voters, Election Day operations, poll workers, poll watchers from candidates and parties, election law, and how elections are run generally. Moreover, students reported more knowledge about the behavioral question about why voters do or do not vote and about methodology issues like research design, research ethics, data collection, and the challenges of fieldwork. Insight on these topics is valuable as they are not limited to one particular course; indeed they are useful in other courses and disciplines.
Figure 4: Knowledge Before and After Election Day Observation Experience

[Bar charts showing changes in knowledge across various topics such as Lines of Voters, Election Day Operations, Poll Workers, Election Law, How elections are run generally, Why people do or don't vote, Research Design, Research Ethics, Data Collection, and Challenges of field work.]
Assessment of future interest

Our survey also measured students’ engagement with election science and research. Despite recently experiencing the grind of data collection in the field, fifty-two percent of students said they were extremely (21%) or very (30%) likely to participate in a similar research project (Figure 5). Only 11% said they were not at all likely to do so. When asked if they would recommend a friend participate in a similar project, fifty-eight percent said they were extremely (24%) or very (34%) likely to recommend it (see SOM Figure 5). Only 8% said they were not at all likely to recommend the experience to others.

We also asked students whether they would like to learn more about several election science topics (Figure 6). (Asking whether they would like to do more research about these topics produced highly similar responses; see SOM Figure 6). Narrow election science topics of lines and poll-workers did not prompt high levels of interest for learning or research, but it is probably safe to assert that the levels among these students are still dramatically higher than among the general public. Election Day operation generally draws more interest for future learning and research, perhaps because the broader term encompasses more aspects of their experience. Election law, election science generally, and the reasons for voter participation draw high levels of interest for future work. While faculty may immediately think of course
enrollment implications, the more important aspect of this interest is the engagement of these students with the process of democracy.

**Figure 6: How interested are you in learning more about the following topics?**

![Figure 6: How interested are you in learning more about the following topics?](image)

**Discussion**

Experiential learning opportunities like the project described here offer students a chance to learn about political processes outside the classroom and in a concrete, tangible manner. Instructors who tap into these opportunities are able to create a space for students to and to foster important societal values, such as various qualities of citizenship. Our findings indicate observing polling places for the Polling Place Lines Project was a valuable learning experience in the short and long-term. In the short-term, students found their experiences to be valuable, directly reported learning in general and specifically related to course material; they also felt more knowledgeable about election science topics, voting behavior, and research methods. In the long-term, students were interested in participating in similar research in the future, would recommend other students do so as well, and expressed interest in more learning and research about the topics central to their experience. Our results suggest participants appreciated the importance of elections and the study of them. Taken collectively, the participating students are engaged and efficacious – essential qualities of citizens in a democracy.

Further, it is worth noting that we have assessed here only the common denominator of students’ Election Day experiences. Many participating faculty enriched the Election Day
experience with attention in their courses to election science, voting behavior, public policy, public administration and more. Several participating faculty used the data collected by their students to teach empirical analysis. In short, this report thus provides a conservative estimate of the pedagogical value of our 2016 polling place observation project.

This project highlights the multifaceted importance of and potential for collaboration. First, nearly all participating faculty found local election administrators were cooperative. Many of these public officials were downright enthusiastic about this project to engage students with the election process. Second, the collaboration among faculty at different colleges and universities worked well. For the research on polling place operations, this collaboration provided a dataset heretofore unavailable about polling place lines and other characteristics in different jurisdictions during a single election. On the pedagogical side, the collaboration was limited to participation in the learning assessment survey. Greater collaboration could further bolster the pedagogical value with activities, such as videoconference presentations and discussions among students observing different jurisdictions.

The 2016 Polling Place Lines Project is the genesis of our ongoing project. We invite faculty members at other institutions to join the 2018 Polling Place Lines Project for the pedagogical opportunity for their students as well as supporting the research. If interested, please contact Chris Mann (cmann@skidmore.edu), Charles Stewart III (cstewart@mit.edu), or Michael Herron (Michael.C.Herron@dartmouth.edu).
References


Supplemental Online Materials

List of Participating Institutions

1. Brigham Young University-Idaho
2. Bucknell University
3. Claremont Graduate University
4. Fairfield University
5. Fordham University
6. Kansas State University
7. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
8. Michigan State University
9. Pitzer College
10. Purdue University Northwest
11. Rice University
12. Skidmore College
13. Suffolk University
14. University of Houston
15. University of Iowa
16. University of Kentucky
17. University of Mississippi
18. University of Missouri, St. Louis
19. University of South Carolina
20. University of Southern California
21. University of Virginia
22. Washington University-St. Louis
23. Wesleyan College
Supplemental Figures

SOM Figure 2a: How valuable was the time you spent observing voting activity on Election Day?

SOM Figure 2b: Did this activity enhance your understanding of class materials? (among 257 students required to participate)
SOM Figure 5: How likely would you be to recommend that a student similar to you participate in a future research project about voting activity?

SOM Figure 6: How interested are you in doing more research about the following topics?
Learning Assessment Survey

Q1 Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. The survey has questions about your experience making observations about lines and the administration of voting on Election Day. Each question is optional, but please answer as many as possible. Your responses are anonymous and will be kept confidential. The Qualtrics online platform used to collect responses has commercial level encryption and password protection. We are not collecting any personal information in the survey and are not collecting any information about your IP address or location when taking the survey. Data from the survey will be stored in password-protected files. In any report that is published or presentation that is given, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant, though your responses may be identified with your academic institution.

Q2 Do you consent to participate in the learning assessment survey?

- I agree to participate (1)
- I do not agree to participate (2)

If I do not agree to participate Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Q3

- First Year Undergraduate (1)
- Sophomore (2)
- Junior (3)
- Senior (4)
- Graduate Student (5)

Q4 Why did you participate in this project?

- Required for class (1)
- Extra credit for class (2)
- Volunteered (3)
- Other (4) ____________________

Q5 What was the name of the class?

Q6 How many hours did you spend on the project on Election Day?
Q7 What time of day did you observe voting activity? (choose all that apply; if you observed voting activity at any time within the hour, include that hour in your choices.)

- 6:00am - 7:00am (1)
- 7:00am - 8:00am (2)
- 8:00am - 9:00am (3)
- 9:00am - 10:00am (4)
- 10:00am - 11:00am (5)
- 11:00am - 12:00pm (6)
- 12:00pm - 1:00pm (7)
- 1:00pm - 2:00pm (8)
- 2:00pm - 3:00pm (9)
- 3:00pm - 4:00pm (10)
- 4:00pm - 5:00pm (11)
- 5:00pm - 6:00pm (12)
- 6:00pm - 7:00pm (13)
- 7:00pm - 8:00pm (14)
- 8:00pm - 9:00pm (15)
- 9:00pm or later (16)

Q8 How many locations did you observe during the day?

Q9 Did you use a paper form or a smartphone app for tracking lines?

- Paper form (1)
- Smartphone app (2)

Q10 How well would you say the smartphone app worked for tracking lines?

- Very well (1)
- Okay (2)
- Fair (3)
- Poor (4)
- Not at all well (5)

Q11 Do you have any suggestions for improving the smartphone app for future research on lines of voters?
Q12 How valuable was the time you spent observing voting activity on Election Day?
- Not valuable (1)
- Slightly valuable (2)
- Somewhat valuable (3)
- Extremely valuable (4)

Q13 How much would you say you learned from your Election Day experiences?
- Very little (1)
- Small amount (2)
- Good amount (3)
- A lot (4)

Display This Question:
If Why did you participate in this project? Required for class Is Selected
Or Why did you participate in this project? Extra credit for class Is Selected

Q14 Did this activity enhance your understanding of class materials?
- Very little (1)
- Small amount (2)
- Good amount (3)
- A lot (4)

Q15 How well prepared were you ahead of time for the activity on Election Day?
- Not well prepared (1)
- Somewhat prepared (2)
- Well prepared (3)
- Very well prepared (4)

Q16 How likely would you be to participate in a similar research project about voting activity?
- Not at all likely (1)
- Somewhat likely (2)
- Very likely (3)
- Extremely likely (4)

Q17 How likely would you be to recommend that a student similar to you participate in a future research project about voting activity?
- Not at all likely (1)
- Somewhat likely (2)
- Very likely (3)
- Extremely likely (4)
Q18 Before this semester, how much did you know about each of the following topics from the voter lines project?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Very little (1)</th>
<th>Small amount (2)</th>
<th>Good amount (3)</th>
<th>A lot (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lines of voters (1)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Election Day operations (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>Poll workers (3)</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poll watchers from candidates or parties (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Election law (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>How elections are run generally (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why people do or don’t vote (7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research design (8)</td>
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<td>Research ethics (9)</td>
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<td>Data collection (10)</td>
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<td>Challenges of field work (11)</td>
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</table>
Q30 After this research project, how much do you know about each of the following topics from the voter lines project?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very little (1)</th>
<th>Small amount (2)</th>
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Q19 How interested are you in learning more about the following topics:

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<th>Good amount (3)</th>
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<td>Election law (3)</td>
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<td>Poll workers (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>How elections are run generally (5)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why people do or don’t vote (6)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q20 How interested are you in doing more research about the following topics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very little (1)</th>
<th>Small amount (2)</th>
<th>Good amount (3)</th>
<th>A lot (4)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lines of voters (1)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Election Day operation (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Election law (3)</td>
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<td>Poll workers (4)</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q21 In a few words, please tell us...

Q22 The best part of your experience

Q23 The worst part of your experience

Q24 The most important thing you learned

Q25 What you would suggest for future research on voting lines or Election Day activity