



NATIONAL TASK FORCE ON ELECTION CRISES

Protecting Election Workers from Threats and Harassment

September 2023

Overview

Election officials and poll workers are critical to ensuring that elections run smoothly and remain secure. Over 130,000 paid poll workers and 690,000 volunteers served in these roles during the 2020 election. The pandemic year saw a large increase in younger poll workers who may remain engaged with our civic institutions for years, or may end their engagement in part due to threats. Meanwhile, nearly 50% of poll workers are still over 60, the vast majority are women, and both the paid and volunteer base come from local communities. In recent years, they have operated under threats and harassment due to baseless misinformation. These threats are exacerbated by a need for more funding and resources to enhance their security. Before the 2024 election, state legislatures should help prevent election crises by passing legislation that protects our election workforce from threats and harm.

The Risk of Threats

Election officials and workers have paid a literal and figurative price due to the threats that they face, leaving potential gaps in the ability of states and counties to effectively run elections:

- Since the 2020 election, 30% of election officials have [reported](#) being abused, harassed, or threatened. 73% of election officials believe threats have increased in recent years.
- Violent threats have forced some election officials to buy home security systems, engage police surveillance, flee their homes, and live in fear.
- 11% of local election officials are unlikely to serve through the 2024 election.
- 51% of election officials worry that threats and harassment will make it harder to retain or recruit election workers in future elections.
- Many states have [faced significant turnover](#) in top election official positions, leading to a loss of institutional knowledge that could impact their ability to run elections smoothly.

Bipartisan Support for Meeting This Challenge

- 75% of Americans [agree](#) that election workers should be protected. Most local election officials say that both state and federal governments must do more to support them in their jobs.

The National Task Force on Election Crises has identified four legislative recommendations to protect election workers from threats:

Protecting Privacy

- Many instances of threats and harassment of election officials and workers can be traced back to the online availability of their personally identifiable information (PII).
- Allowing election workers the option to keep their PII confidential would help shield them from harassment and violence.
- States should also attempt to deter threats before they occur by ensuring accountability for doxxing. Bad actors who widely share election officials' home addresses and personal phone numbers put those officials and their families at risk.

Improving Legal Remedies

- Election officials and poll workers often do not have a clear mechanism by which to sue perpetrators of threats or hold them accountable.
- Creating new civil causes of action would give election officials another tool to protect themselves in circumstances that do not result in criminal prosecution.
- Empowering State Attorneys General to intervene on behalf of election officials would provide another avenue to ensure accountability, mainly where individual election officials are unable to sue on their own behalf.

Adequately Funding Elections

- Elections must be adequately funded to ensure that our election infrastructure and election officials are secure.
- Because each voting jurisdiction can have unique funding needs, making sure funds go where they are needed – especially at the local level – would help keep our elections more safe, secure, and efficient.
- Funding could go towards infrastructure – like locks, panic buttons, reliable communication technology & IT systems, video cameras, and bulletproof glass – or staffing, training, security services, and security systems. Adequately funding our elections is key to ensuring that they run smoothly and earn the trust of the people.

Holding Bad Actors Accountable

- When those who have threatened and harassed election workers get away with it, it emboldens bad behavior while making Americans feel like the system is failing.
- While it remains unclear how effective new criminal penalties alone would be, criminal penalties may help highlight the severity of the threats election officials face and provide additional avenues for accountability. Additionally, there may be some jurisdictions where new or revised penalties are needed to provide clear applicability to the current range of threats. Legislators who propose criminal penalties should craft them with special sensitivity to the ways such laws could be abused.
- There should be clear channels to report threats and greater transparency around threats that are reported and outcomes.

For inquiries about this explainer or to request an interview with one of the Task Force members please email us at tfrequest@protectdemocracy.org.

About the National Task Force on Election Crises

The mission of the nonpartisan National Task Force on Election Crises is to prevent and mitigate a range of election crises by calling for critical preventative reforms to our election systems. The only electoral outcome the Task Force advocates for are free, fair, and safe elections in the United States.