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Minneapolis Election Judge Project

# Insights for Election Administrators from High School Poll Workers

What Youth Want You to Know

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## Introduction

In any given election, there are nearly one million poll workers assigned to more than 100,000 polling locations across the United States (Election Assistance Commission, [2013](#), [2019](#)).

Poll workers are the face of elections. They are the people voters interact with when voting in person, and they shape how voters perceive their voting experience (Claassen, Mableby, Monson and Patterson 2008; Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2007, 2009; King 2017; Powell and Slevin 2004). “Poll workers are responsible for following the appropriate federal and state voting and elections policy for check-in and voter verification, providing the administrative support necessary to answer voter questions, providing and ensuring the proper handling of ballots, and troubleshooting when problems arise” (King and Barnes, 2018). In spite of their importance, election officials regularly report challenges with recruiting enough poll workers and recruiting poll workers that reflect the race/ethnicity and language diversity of their voters (Election Assistance Commission, 2019; [Adona, Groke, Manson, and Cole, 2019](#)).<sup>1</sup>

Because election offices want to staff their polling places with workers who represent the community of voters, there are good reasons to establish young poll worker programs and recruit high school students as part of that diverse body of workers—even when they are not yet old enough to vote.<sup>2</sup> Student poll worker programs can not only diversify the pool of poll workers, they can also enhance the capacity of polling locations.

This brief analyzes survey data from a group of student poll workers in Minneapolis. The survey data provides an overview of the benefits of student election judging, both in terms of knowledge of process and procedures and increasing civic agency among young people and in terms of the benefits for election administration.

## Bridging the Gap

There are a lot of things that high school students learn to do in their classes, and while they may learn a lot about political parties, they learn considerably less about the processes they will have to navigate to vote.

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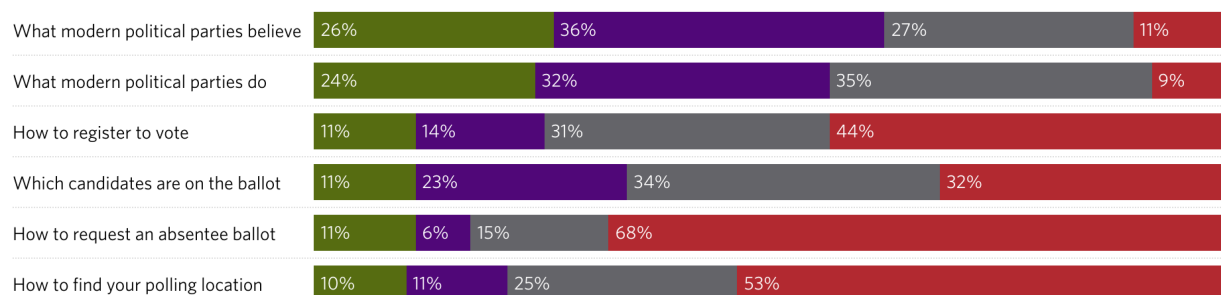
<sup>1</sup> 46.9 percent of jurisdictions who responded to the United State Election Assistance Commission Election Administration and Voting Survey for 2018 reported having a somewhat difficult or very difficult time recruiting poll workers. 22.7 percent of jurisdictions reported having a somewhat easy or very easy time (Election Administration and Voting Survey, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> The term “poll worker” is just one of the names used to describe the role across the United States. Poll workers may also be referred to as election judges, booth workers, wardens, commissioners, or other similar terms (Election Administration and Voting Survey, 2018).

## How Much Did You Learn in School About...

Respondents learned more about the actions and positions of political parties, less about the practicalities of registration and voting.

■ A great deal ■ A moderate amount ■ a little ■ Not at all



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Source: Minneapolis 2020 election youth poll worker post-election survey

When asked how much they learned about voting processes in school, many youth poll workers reported that they did not learn much at all. In fact, 44% of youth stated that they did not learn how to register to vote and 53% of youth said that their schools also did not teach them how to find their polling place. In a sharp contrast, almost 70% of youth who participated as poll workers said that serving as an election judge helped them understand the voting system to a great extent.

Among youth election judges, 97% identified voting as an important form of civic participation. Many young people are already engaged in other forms of political participation, are serving their communities, and are interested in youth poll worker programs.

## Working as an Election Judge...

A majority of young poll workers felt that the experience connected them to the community and improved their skills.

Made me feel I helped ensure every eligible voter felt welcome and able to vote



Made me feel I was making things better for my community



Gave me practical skills that will help me in the future



Helped me improve how to communicate with older people



Gave me a strong sense of belonging to my community



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Chart: Minneapolis 2020 election youth poll worker post-election survey

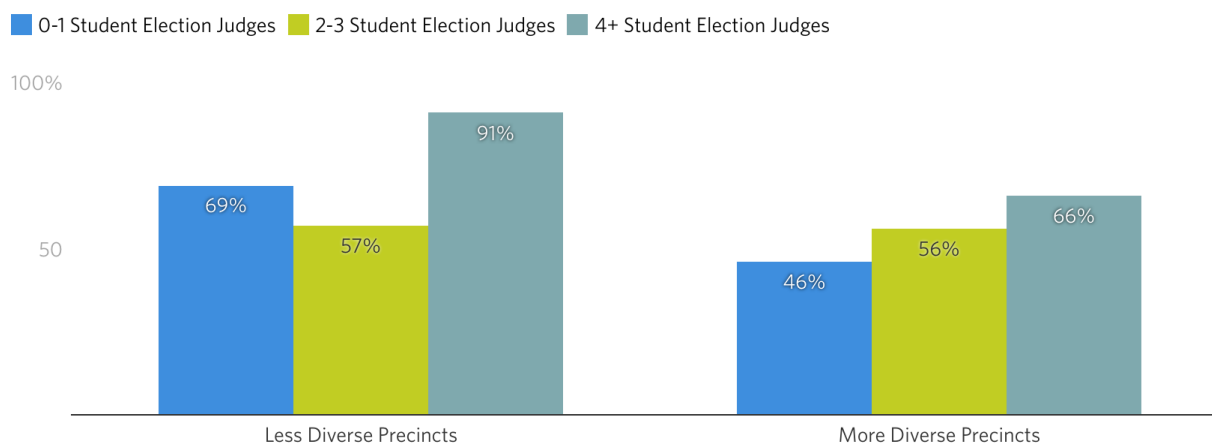
## Having Student Poll Workers Led to Higher Youth Voting

The survey created and fielded by young leaders in Minneapolis shows that young poll workers believe they benefit in myriad ways from the experience. Having more young poll workers may benefit democracy more broadly: a regression model of precinct-level voter turnout in 2020 suggested that, accounting for the 2016 general election turnout, the population size, and the racial/ethnic composition of the precinct population, the number of youth election judges at a given precinct was significantly correlated with estimated voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds.

A follow-up analysis indicated that having youth poll workers may be especially important in precincts where at least 40% of the residents are members of minority groups. While, overall, youth voter turnout tends to be lower in these more diverse precincts, those with four or more student election judges (out of 10-12 total poll workers) had a similar youth voter turnout rate than less diverse precincts with just one or no student election judges. Therefore, our study suggests that young election workers may be most important in precincts where voters are more diverse and can help ensure that there's greater equality in voter participation across different communities.

## Youth Voter Turnout Was Highest in Minneapolis Precincts with More Student Election Judges

CIRCLE estimates of the average youth voter turnout (ages 18-24) in precincts, based on population demographics and the number of student poll workers in each precinct.



**Notes:** "More diverse" precincts are defined as those where 40% or more of the population is nonwhite.

We removed several precincts that are immediately adjacent to universities within the city and had a very large share of 18- to 24-year-olds. Due to students possibly moving out of the neighborhood due to the COVID-19 pandemic and universities offering virtual instruction, we did not believe we could accurately estimate the residential population in those precincts at the time of the 2020 election.

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Source: CIRCLE analysis of 132 Minneapolis precincts' aggregated turnout data from the 2020 Catalyst voter files, along with American Community Survey population estimates

## What Student Poll Workers Thought About their Experience in the Program

There are many ways that working as a poll worker can have a positive effect on high school students. One of the best ways to understand how these programs are beneficial to high school students and can be improved is to listen to the experiences of the students who have served in these roles and the election administration professionals who regularly work with high school election judge programs.



**"Being a student election judge has improved my communication, my problem solving skills and my whole personality in a way. I really feel fulfilled when I am helping people and I wanna help improve that experience for others and get even more involved in my community."**

**"Serving as an election judge in three elections has given me insight into how valuable to our community this duty is and the direct impact that this position can have. My passion for this work has led me to advocate for teen involvement in Elections through my school, organizations, and personal connections. I am committed to promoting and distinguishing this service and look forward to engaging more students within the civic process."**



**"As a student, I would like to gain more experience with the election process and in government. I want to help other students understand how important their role is in local and national elections. Many students in Minneapolis don't understand the impact that their vote makes with issues that affect them directly."**



## Recommendations for Election Administrators

- **Keep in mind that the students that you already know and work with are a powerful network.** They talk with their family members and friends about the

experience, making it easier to recruit their friends and siblings to work in the polling place. They can also introduce you to staff at their school.

- **Remember that schools benefit from forming a partnership with election administrators.** For such a partnership would provide schools with opportunities that would allow their students to grow and become more civically active and involved in their community. When reaching out to schools, make sure to highlight how a partnership would be beneficial for both parties. The more Election Administrators reach out to and build partnerships with schools, the more youth will be introduced to and potentially join their programs.

- **Diversify the pool of student election judges** by reaching out to more charter schools and schools with large numbers of students of color.

Check out the [Student Election Judge Toolkit](#), which contains a collection of templates, sample communications, training videos, and more that you can adapt to use in your jurisdiction.

- **Further solidify partnership with schools** by providing them with resources on elections and voting processes within their state. Presentations, infographics, and even in-person or virtual visits from election officials would give students the chance to learn more about elections and voting at school, a chance they usually don't get. Setting up guided tours of the elections office in the off-season for classes, or perhaps even putting together mock elections so students can practice what they learn and feel prepared for when they are eventually able to vote, would also be a valuable learning experience for students.
- **Reach out to students in ways that appeal to them.** When seeking to recruit youth for Youth Election Judge Programs, make sure to use flyers with bright colors and interesting graphics, clearly define the program requirements and the application process, and most importantly let students know how exactly they would benefit from joining the program.

- **Broaden community impact** by cultivating a larger social media presence and making credible information about elections and voting procedures more accessible to the public.

## About the Research

The data contained in this report was collected through the Minneapolis Election Judge Project, a collaborative effort between Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services, the YMCA of the North, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, Auburn University, and the Civic Scholars. The Civic Scholars are a group of student interns currently enrolled in high school and college who were selected to participate a series of projects related to the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services Student Election Judge Program. One of the projects was a survey to evaluate the experiences of student poll workers during the 2020 General Election. Both a pre-election survey and post-election survey of youth election judges were conducted in October and November of 2020. The survey questions were created by the Civic Scholars with guidance from the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services, the YMCA of the North, CIRCLE, and Auburn University. The survey was administered by the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services Student Election Judge Program. A total of 133 youth election judges responded to the pre-election survey, and 147 to the post-election survey. The data presented is from the post-election survey.

From January 2021 to April 2021, the Civic Scholars worked with the partner organizations to produce three reports from the 2020 surveys. This report is one of three that was created from that work. The other two reports, one of which summarizes lessons and findings from the project, and another aimed at teachers and educators, can be found on the CIRCLE website.

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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