

**Poll Worker Decision Making at the American Ballot Box\***

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Prepared for the 2019 Election Sciences, Reform, and Administration Conference

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**Abstract:** Street-level bureaucrats operate under fairly limited oversight, and are also the actors that de facto set the terms for policy implementation. This leaves room for discrepancies between the theoretical intent of a law and how it is actually applied by its most direct arbiters. In American elections, poll workers serve in this street-level bureaucrat position, bridging the gap between legal voting requirements required by state governments and citizen experiences at the polls. Using an examination of voter eligibility requirements and in-depth interviews conducted with poll workers in the city of Chicago—a jurisdiction where poll workers are asked to verify voter identity by signature—this paper examines what constitutes poll worker decisions about voter eligibility. Respondents offered detailed—and varied—information about what they look for when comparing signatures. Reflecting ambiguity in state election code, they also had different ideas about how to navigate mismatching signatures—ranging from relatively lenient responses to strict enforcement. Notably, they suggested that working in the same precinct and with the same people from election to election made the processing of voters easier.

Depending on where they live, voters in the United States are asked to provide a range of different information—from writing their signature on an application to providing a photo identification—in order to confirm their eligibility to cast a ballot. While recent research has been focused on the impact of variation in these requirements for access to voting—most notably on laws requiring citizens to show photo identification—far less attention has been paid to how laws that are passed at the state level for verifying voter eligibility are actually implemented by their most direct arbiters: poll workers. As the primary “street-level bureaucrats” in American elections, poll workers have substantial authority in determining whether citizens have provided adequate information to prove their eligibility to vote (Alvarez and Hall 2006; Lipsky 1980). Or, to put it in the perspective of one poll worker themselves: “I see myself as a bridge between the people and the ones representing us, because without [poll workers] you can’t have a proper election... ultimately we are the ones who decides who gets to vote and who doesn’t.”

This paper addresses the implementation aspect of voting requirements by examining how poll workers make decisions about one central aspect of the voting process: confirming voter eligibility. Given that poll workers play such a vital role in connecting the voter with legal voting requirements in their state, I contend it is important to understand how the electoral process works from the perspective of the individuals running the show on Election Day. I examine what constitutes poll worker decisions through 26 in-depth interviews with poll workers in Chicago, Illinois.<sup>1</sup> In Illinois, poll workers are asked to compare signatures provided by voters at the polling place with signatures on file in an electronic poll book.<sup>2</sup> To inform the patterns

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<sup>1</sup> In Illinois poll workers are referred to as “Election Judges” or “Judges of Elections.” For the sake of comparison with other research on poll workers, I will refer to respondents as “poll workers” in the remainder of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> (10 ILCS 5/5-29) of the Illinois Elections Code reads: The Judges in charge of the precinct registration files shall compare the signature upon such certificate with the signature on the

highlighted in my interviews, I also discuss the guidance that is provided in Illinois' state election codes and the Chicago Poll Worker Manual. With this language as a starting point, my primary empirical evidence summarizes a constitutive analysis of my interviews with Chicago poll workers. Importantly, this paper does not incorporate a causal analysis of what predicts poll worker decisions, but rather focuses on describing what constitutes these decisions (Cramer-Walsh 2012). My goal then is not to understand the independent effects of different characteristics on poll worker decisions, but to explain how poll workers themselves make sense of the laws they are applying, identifying the reasoning and processes poll workers use to make decisions.<sup>3</sup>

My interviews with revealed that poll worker decisions about voter eligibility are made up of a range of considerations. Not surprisingly, respondents told me they encountered signatures that had changed over time, but there were different responses over what to do with mismatching signatures. Some were willing to overlook them, especially if they knew the voter. Others felt they had no choice but to ask for identification, and in instances where a signature could not be verified and identification produced, provisional ballots were sometimes seen as a solution. Finally, one common pattern across interviews was that working in the same precinct

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registration record card as a means of identifying the voter. Unless satisfied by such comparison that the applicant to vote is the identical person who is registered under the same name, the Judges shall ask such applicant the questions for identification which appear on the registration card and if the applicant does not prove to the satisfaction of a majority of the judges of the election precinct that he is the identical person registered under the name in question then the vote for such applicant shall be challenged by a Judge of Election, and the same procedure followed as provided by law for challenged voters.

<sup>3</sup> A positivist study of this topic might measure different characteristics of poll workers such as age, party affiliation, or race and include them as independent variables in a multivariate analysis where the dependent variable is a measurement of poll worker decisions constructed from a survey. Such an approach is problematic in this case given that the object of my study is not a response to a question about voter eligibility on a survey but rather the considerations poll workers make when making decisions about voter eligibility (Cramer-Walsh 2012).

and with the same poll workers from election to election—particularly if it was a precinct near a poll worker’s home—made the processing of voters easier. Some also suggested that working with the same group of people over time allowed them to form a good relationship with their co-workers that carried over from election to election. In my conclusion I discuss problems with these kinds of considerations, as well as how these ideas raise a potential solution to one of the central problems facing poll workers—that they are temporary employees with a limited chance to develop a shared set of norms or organizational culture due to the limited time-frame of their work (Atkeson et al 2014).

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is not to establish the independent effects of various characteristics on poll worker decisions (e.g. Atkeson et al 2014; Cobb et al 2012), but to describe the different ways poll workers assess voter eligibility and how they make sense of the laws they are applying. While my findings are limited to one jurisdiction, I hope to highlight the ways in which in-depth qualitative data about poll workers’ perceptions of their jobs can refine positivist studies that evaluate poll worker performance. The kind of evidence presented in this paper helps clarify the mechanisms by which these decisions are made and may pave the way for procedural changes that limit bias. More broadly, I hope to encourage researchers to think differently about the kind of research that helps us evaluate our electoral systems. I contend there is a need for researchers interested in improving elections in the United States to listen to carefully to the perspectives of people who are actually “on the ground” running elections to understand where improvements can be made.

### **Existing Research: Discretion in Street-Level Bureaucracy**

Street-level bureaucrats are the public officials in charge of implementing policy passed at higher levels of government. A lack of oversight and ambiguity in how a policy is articulated

in legislation means these individuals often have discretion over how a policy is implemented, the quality of the services delivered, and who receives them. Ultimately, this means the decisions these bureaucrats make become *de facto* public policy if there is room for discretion or if a lack of oversight allows for decisions that deviate from policymakers' intent (Lipsky 1980).

Discretion in the decisions made by street-level bureaucrats can cut two ways. On the one hand, having flexibility in how they implement policy can allow them to provide access to services that certain constituents may not be able to otherwise access. For example, though it may not be formally inscribed in state election code, some election administrators can decide to provide what is known as “curbside voting” for voters with disabilities unable to get out of their vehicles. On the other hand, discretion can lead to differential treatment of constituents seeking services, such as election administrators being more likely to respond to certain types of voters (White et al 2015). There are two theoretical explanations for variation in street-level bureaucrats' discretion in election administration, particularly in terms differences in how they treat constituents. One contends that differences can be explained by technical aspects of the job, including organizational rules, available resources, and different capacities to respond to constituent complaints effectively across all constituents (Jones et al 1997, Mladenka 1981). The second explanation is that factors like race, ethnicity, and partisanship (both of the bureaucrat and the constituents they are serving) affect the services provided.<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, there is compelling evidence that the latter explanation plays a role in the treatment of constituents of different racial and ethnic background in particular. In one

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<sup>4</sup> For example, research on the decisions of street-level bureaucrats that focuses on the provision of welfare services finds that nonwhite recipients typically receive lower quality information and services from case workers and their local welfare offices, and are more likely to be the target of scrutiny by case workers for potential rule violations (Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004; Ernst, Nguyen and Taylor 2013).

study, researchers randomly assigned all county or municipal election officials in 48 US states to receive e-mails from fictitious constituents with either putatively Latino or non-Latino white names requesting information about voter ID laws. Latino respondents were less likely to receive any response relative to white counterparts from local election officials responsible for disseminating such information to voters, and when they did respond, the quality of the information received was lower relative to white constituents (White et al 2015). A similar experiment e-mailing nearly 5000 state legislators found comparable patterns when legislators were sent e-mails by putatively black constituents about voter registration processes. Requests from black constituents received fewer replies than those from white constituents, particularly when e-mails were sent to white state legislators (Butler and Broockman 2011). Though state-legislators may not be considered “street-level” bureaucrats in that they are enforcing policy, they still have a technical responsibility to respond to constituents. Both studies show that individuals who have a responsibility to provide the public with information about voting do so with considerable discretion.

### **Poll Workers as Street-Level Bureaucrats**

While state legislators and election administrators may have a responsibility to be responsive to voters and to provide them with accurate information, poll workers are—in theory—tasked with directly *enforcing* legal requirements in their decisions about voter eligibility. With this responsibility comes the potential for inaccurate enforcement of these provisions, especially considering how difficult oversight and enforcement of poll workers can be (Atkeson et al 2014, Alvarez and Hall 2006). In one report to Congress, for example, the United States General Accounting office suggested that poll workers have “the final authority on interpreting guidance in areas such as deciding who can vote and determining voter intent”

(2001, 160). Moreover, poll workers, unlike their counterparts in higher of election administration, do not do the work as a career, but rather as temporary employees who may go to a few training sessions and work one day every few years. The theoretical argument underpinning research on poll worker decisions conceptualizes them as street-level bureaucrats that are uniquely subject to the shirking and sabotaging of policies—whether purposefully or unintentionally. By virtue of their temporary status, they are not likely to be a part of the organizational culture of higher levels of election administration. And unlike career street-level bureaucrats, poll workers are less likely to have a shared set of norms or sense of conformity, and are not subject to consistent and direct oversight (Atkeson et al 2014).

Given the absence of consistent and direct oversight of poll workers, as well as their lack of professionalization and opportunities to develop norms that mitigate against mistakes and bias, it is reasonable to expect that poll workers make mistakes and exercise inappropriate discretion in applying their state’s policies for verifying voter eligibility (Alvarez and Hall 2006). There is some evidence, however, that this discretion has more negative consequences for certain groups of voters. For example, a survey of poll workers in New Mexico—a state that has otherwise minimal identification requirements<sup>5</sup>,—found that voter identification requirements are not implemented equally across voters. Minority voters in particular were subjected to more stringent identification requests. Strikingly, this evidence suggests that poll workers’ education levels and attitudes towards photo identification requirements—not the race or partisanship of

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<sup>5</sup> The exception in these states is for voters who fall under the specifications outlined in the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA), are required to show some form of identification. Voters who registered to vote by mail, did not include a photo copy of a valid ID with their mailed registration form, or were voting for the first time are asked to show identification before election day or at the polls under HAVA requirements (Pub. Law 107-252 § 303; 42 U.S.C. § 14853).

poll workers—explained the variation in the implementation of identification requirements (Atkeson et al 2014, see also Atkeson et al 2010, see also Cobb et al 2012).

While this research identifies that the unequal application of voter identification requirements does occur, it says little about how poll workers arrive at these decisions in the first place. Knowing that educational achievement and attitudes towards photo identification, for example, predict whether or not a poll worker will ask voters for identification tells us little about what actually constitutes poll worker decisions and what might be done to mitigate opportunities for improper discretion and bias—whether implicit or explicit.

At the same time, there are also reasons to expect that certain aspects of poll workers' jobs may mitigate against mistakes and inappropriate exercises of discretion. First, poll workers are willing to take on an often-thankless job for very little pay. They are asked to work long shifts, sometimes 14 hours or more, and must also complete requisite training to learn how to manage polling stations, operate machinery, and identify and sort requisite voter forms (Banks 2016). This has led some researchers to suggest that many poll workers are driven to do the work they do not out of a desire for tangible rewards, rather for the intrinsic rewards that come from providing a vital public service and supporting the democratic process (McAullife 2009). It is possible, then, that what motivates them to serve as poll workers in the first place may act as check on improper discretion.

Second, poll workers are explicitly instructed to keep their polling place free from political and partisan discussion. They are responsible for enforcing limitations on electioneering within a certain distance of polling places, and are asked to not discuss their personal preferences amongst themselves or with voters on Election Day. Of course, as with other aspects of poll

worker responsibilities, these are requirements that are difficult to enforce on a case by case basis and subject to principal-agent problems (Alvarez and Hall 2006).

These expectations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Poll workers might be driven to serve out of a sense of civic duty and public service, and at the same time be susceptible to mistakes and implicit biases in their judgements, both which are compounded by inconsistent oversight. Additionally, discretion may vary by the type of voter requirements being enforced. We should expect states where there is more room for subjective interpretations of the identification provided by voters may make poll workers particularly susceptible to discretionary bias—willful or otherwise. The opposite may be true in states that provide more clearly delineated instructions for poll workers as they identify voters and verify eligibility. In the remainder of this paper, I explore these expectations in the context of Illinois’ signature-based requirements—which I argue leaves substantial room for discretion and subjective decisions in the signature matching process.

## **Data and Methods**

Drawing from a list of all 9925 poll workers who served during the November 2018 midterm elections in Chicago,<sup>6</sup> I randomly selected 15 Chicago wards and two poll workers from each precinct in these wards, mailing invitations to 1192 poll workers between February and April of 2019 to take an online survey about their experiences.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the survey, Poll workers were asked if they would like to participate in follow-up interviews about their experiences. The sections that follow summarize data from 26 of these interviews. Summary

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<sup>6</sup> 10 ILCS 5/13/-3, Chapter 43, par. 13-3

<sup>7</sup> During the interview period Chicago conducted a first round of a mayoral elections in late February and a runoff in early April. In addition to serving during the November 2018 midterms, each of the poll workers I interviewed for this paper served in at least one of these elections.

demographic statistics about interview respondents and the wards in which they worked can be found in the appendix. To protect the identity of respondents, pseudonyms are used in this analysis.

The interview protocol asked several questions from which poll workers could discuss how they evaluate voter eligibility based on the requirements for their jurisdiction. Below is an example of the kinds of prompts, questions and follow up probes asked—specific to the requirements in Illinois—to illustrate the factors that constitute respondents’ decision-making process about voter eligibility.

I study election laws and voting, but I am especially interested decision making by individuals in charge of enforcing election laws. Now, I am going to switch gears a little and ask you about your experiences making decisions as an election officer.

1. Could you describe the process of checking in a voter and confirming their eligibility?
2. Have there ever been instances where you were unsure of a voter’s eligibility based on the signature they provided? [PROBE: What did you do?] [PROBE: How did you decide what to do?][PROBE: What kinds of things did you consider?]
3. What guidance did you receive in training—if any—of how to navigate uncertainties surrounding a voter’s signature?

The aim of these questions was to develop multiple avenues through which poll workers might illustrate how they evaluate voter eligibility. These eligibility-specific questions were embedded around a broader discussion about respondents’ motivation for serving, other challenges they’ve faced on the job, positive experiences they have had, and how they perceive the role they play in serving voters and in the democratic process. The full template for the interview protocol (generalized to be adaptable to states with different voter identification requirements) can be found in the appendix at the end of this paper.

## **Empirical Analysis**

Examining the laws for identifying voters in a given state and how they are laid out in poll worker manuals illustrates—in theory—how these laws might be applied. Interviews with poll workers provide insight into how the laws are actually interpreted and what considerations are made when poll workers make decisions about voter eligibility. In this section I discuss the relevant section of Illinois’ state election code and instructions provided to poll workers in the Chicago poll worker manual before summarizing and providing examples of the patterns that arose from my interviews.

### *Statutory and Manual Guidance for Poll Workers*

In the most recent version of the Chicago poll worker manual, there is no written guidance for what constitutes a matching or mismatching signature. The procedures for what poll workers should do if they determine a signature does not match instructs poll workers to ask the voter for the last two digits of the voter’s social security number to confirm their identity. In cases where the social security number isn’t listed or the voter doesn’t know, the voter is then handled as a “challenged voter”, during which poll workers will clarify for voters the reason for the challenge (in this case, a mismatching signature) and are able to ask voters for additional information, such as asking the voter to show current identification with the voter’s name, address, and photograph if available.<sup>8</sup>

The instructions provided to poll workers in the Chicago election manual echo the official processes outlined in the state of Illinois’ elections code, which reads:

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<sup>8</sup> The official instructions for navigating mismatching signatures and challenges can be found on pages 48 and 53 of the 2019 Chicago Election Judge Manual, respectively. The manual is available here [https://app.chicagoelections.com/documents/Judge-Handbook/EJ\\_Handbook-M2019\\_EntireBook.pdf](https://app.chicagoelections.com/documents/Judge-Handbook/EJ_Handbook-M2019_EntireBook.pdf).

Unless satisfied by such [signature] comparison that the applicant to vote is the identical person who is registered under the same name, the Judges shall ask such applicant the questions for identification which appear on the registration card and if the applicant does not prove to the satisfaction of a majority of the judges of the election precinct that he is the identical person registered under the name in question then the vote for such applicant shall be challenged by a Judge of Election, and the same procedure followed as provided by law for challenged voters.<sup>9</sup>

The code is not specific on what “questions for identification” that appear on a registration card mean, and it may be that local jurisdictions in Illinois have some leeway in determining what qualifies as a proper question for identification (e.g. asking for the last two digits of a social security number or date of birth). The code and the poll worker manual are also similarly ambiguous on the question of what constitutes a “satisfactory” comparison of the applicant to vote and the person registered on the same name, offering no guidance as to what threshold needs to be met—if any—for a pair of signatures to be considered a match.

### *Interview Patterns*

In the sections that follow, I discuss how poll workers characterized the way they evaluate signatures before turning to the question of the type of guidance they are given—if any—in the training process. I then discuss the question of how respondents would proceed in cases where they weren’t certain about a pair of signatures, discussing the role that identification and provisional ballots play in the process. Finally, I share poll workers’ comments about the value of working in the same precinct and with the same poll workers from election to election for ensuring a smooth Election Day experience.

### *Variation in Signatures*

A number of poll workers offered specific details on what they looked for when evaluating signatures, describing different letter and name formations and how they would look

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<sup>9</sup> (10 ILCS 5/5-29) of the Illinois Elections Code

for similarities between signature pairs. Many respondents mentioned how they were generally understanding about signatures that looked different, especially if a fair amount of time had passed between when a voter registered and was casting a ballot. When asked if there had ever been instances where they questioned a voter's eligibility based on the signature provided, some also offered concrete examples of what mismatches might look like and how they would respond.

MSL: Has there ever been an instance where you were not certain about a voter's eligibility?

Linda: Depending on when they registered to vote, people's signatures have changed dramatically. So you often see the first letter of the first name and the last name and then you see squiggles. And it's the same person. It's just that the signatures don't look identical. And I'll comment to them, "Oh, what happened to your signature?"

Dave: No, because some of those signatures that we have on the computer are 20-30 years old, and everybody's signature changes. Some don't, but a lot do. So what I would do is look for some part of the signature that looked similar to some part of the signature that is in the computer, like a little curve here or a curve there, crossing a T and dotting an I. I never ran across an instance where I challenged the voter.

Some respondents told me that they thought about how their own signatures changed over time when they were evaluating voter signatures. They told me they knew it made sense that others signatures would probably be different given that their own varied so much. Sally, for example, told me that every so often her signature changes. "I've got one that I like, and it is quick. I also have a rather long name, and I feel like it is hard to duplicate." Sally was also a respondent who—in her regular job—had experience examining signatures. "You kind of get

familiar with certain things,” she told me. “And if you see people consistently enough, even though it may change slightly... maybe you hurt your hand writing or broke a finger nail, your signature is going to be a little different.”

Jackie was another poll worker who told me she had never found an instance where she had to question a voter’s signature. “I grew up where my signature is very distinctive and I can tell what the letters are,” she said. “Penmanship meant a lot. Now you have people coming in and you may recognize the first letter, but that’s about it. The rest of it is a scribble. What is funny, though, is there is a similarity in the scribble. What you notice is that the first letter always looks similar. And the type of scribble that follows it may not be exact, but it is very similar. The things that are the same are very glaring. I haven’t experienced one where I looked and thought ‘oh, this is different.’”

Jeromy told me that he sometimes encountered differences of opinion between he and his fellow election judges when it came to signatures. “I think when people sign up to be a registered voter they are sometimes more careful about it. Here they are hunched over. It is not their normal way to sign. And they have just come from work or are going to work, and they are more in a rush. Signatures reflect that. Signatures are not perfect. It is usually convincing enough to me. I have, however, had some of the workers under their breath say to me, ‘well what about the signature? It doesn’t look at all the same.’ Even if you say that under your breath, though, voters will hear it and sometimes say ‘I just did that in a hurry, do you want me to redo it?’”

Alex was a poll worker who took the “judge” part of his title quite seriously, and was willing to question certain voters (in Chicago, poll workers are referred to as election judges). Unlike some of my other respondents, he saw exercising judgment on whether or not a signature matched as being a central part of his role and responsibilities.

Alex: First of all, I'm a judge. I have to exercise judgement... Over [where I used to work], I knew everybody. That's the important thing. Is this person who they are pretending to be? So it doesn't matter if Mrs. McGillicuddy's signature has changed, or now she is kind of jittery. We know she is who she is. And I don't think that is doing anybody a favor, I think that is just exercising judgment...that is the judgement part of this that I exercise.

He added: If it [the signature] is completely different, and I'm not talking about this kind of indistinct differences now...but when somebody's [signature] is going the other way and is different, something is enough amiss that this isn't serving as a confirmation of anything to me. At that moment, I will say "look, sir, you can see this. It is nothing like... it is so far from what it used to be, I just... I have to ask for ID." It is my judgment. I could be wrong, but it is the only honorable thing I can do. We are talking rarity, though.

#### *Guidance from Training*

In addition to asking respondents how they navigated signatures comparisons, I was also interested in understanding what guidance—if any—they had been given during training about the process. Most indicated that the matching of signatures was largely left up to their discretion. Jeromy, for example told me he did not think there were any written or verbal guidelines, and that the training largely emphasized the operation of equipment. Rick echoed these sentiments about training and also discussed what might happen in the polling place with a questionable signature. "It is really up to the judge's discretion," he said. Sometimes another judge can challenge it or a poll watcher can challenge it...Actually this is kind of the first line of defense. You can have a signature confirmed by another judge. So if you go to another judge and say 'what do you think?' and they say it is fine, you can pass the voter through. That way you have two judges confirming."

Others recalled the training mentioning the issue of signature matching, but did not remember much guidance in terms of what the analysis process was supposed to look like. James noted that “for most people it doesn’t seem to be that big of an issue. It is pretty rare. I don’t feel like they address it too much in the training other than mentioning it.” Jackie also told me that the signature comparisons were largely left up to poll workers’ discretion, but did mention that during her training she was told that the signature verification process was one of the things voters would get skittish about and to be careful about how they responded to voters with questionable signatures. Similarly, Marie mentioned that she had been told in training that signature handwriting can change, so they should not really need to make it an issue when checking in voters.

#### *Asking for Identification in Response to Mismatching Signatures*

Beyond the questions of the kinds of criteria poll workers use when examining signatures and the guidance they are given in terms of how to navigate mismatching signatures is the question of how they should proceed if they come across a signature that, from their perspective, is too different to issue a voter a standard ballot without further confirming their identity.

Alex also told a story about a young woman who came to vote at his precinct that was very irate about being asked for ID, telling him that he shouldn’t ask for ID and that he was “killing the vote.” He told me that he just had to say, “Look, look at this, how can you say this is a confirmation of who you are? If I let somebody else vote, not you, with this, and then you walked in, you would be angry I let somebody else vote for you!’ Whatever. It didn’t end nicely. How do I say this right? We didn’t smile and say ‘you’re right ok?’ It’s just, she was angry. And this was the worst thing for me, when my motivations are doubted.”

The decision to ask voters for an ID in the instance of questionable signatures was a consistent pattern in my conversations. Under Illinois' election code and as outlined in the Chicago poll worker manual, poll workers can in fact ask for physical identification from voters under the procedures for an "official challenge." But the first step poll workers should take—at least as is laid out in the Chicago poll worker manual—is to ask for the last two digits of a voter's social security number. When asked about how they navigated questionable signatures, the option of asking for the last two digits of a voter's social security number did not generally come up without follow up questions from myself. Alice, for example, said that while she would first ask voters if there was a reason their signature might have changed, if a voter couldn't answer that question she would ask for an ID, because "sometimes their signature looks different than the one they used."

Lisa was a poll worker whose primary responsibility was tending the optical ballot scanner where voters were actually casting their ballots, but she also filled in helping to check in voters from time to time and confirm their eligibility. She said she understood that signatures changed over time, but saw asking for a driver's license as an extra pre-caution given that the position wasn't one she usually filled. "If I was really concerned about the signature of the person I would ask to see their driver's license just to compare signatures. I wouldn't look at any other things, I would just try to see if I could find a way for it to match up."

Harriet told me she was glad there were other options for identifying voters beyond signatures. "If I just had to go on the signature I would probably cast out maybe 20% of signatures," she said, "because not everybody signs identically. I guess because you have what you call your legal signature, the one you have to put on your check when you sign a check, when you do your social security benefits, or something like that. But then if somebody is

writing something like an autograph, it is not your whole name. Maybe it is your first initial and last name or something like that... If it didn't match, then I ask for identification."

Unlike many other respondents, Stephanie told me that her next step when confronted with a mismatching signature was to ask for the voter's social security number, though she did suggest that it might also be appropriate to ask for identification under certain circumstances. She also acknowledged that she did not readily question voters' signatures, especially if there was a perceived language barrier with the voter. "Honestly," she said, "I am not any kind of a handwriting expert, but if I could sort of squint and see like, oh... it doesn't matter if your Ks are different now, but I could see some similarities between them. There was one that totally didn't match, and I just let it go... That person wasn't super fluent in English so I was worried about making them nervous."

Rick also knew that he could ask for the last two digits of a voter's social security number to confirm their identity and also offered other options for what he might do if a signature was not a close enough match. "There have been occasions where it hasn't been immediately apparent a signature is valid," he told me. "We aren't technically allowed to ask for a driver's license, but sometimes people do offer them and then I am able to confirm it. We *can* confirm with a driver's license, but we aren't allowed to demand a driver's license for registered voters. One thing we can also do is ask them to sign again and let them know it needs to match the signature on file. Some people treat it like a credit card signature and scribble, and sometimes I've got to be like, 'I need a real signature.' Another thing we can do is ask them to confirm the last two digits of their social security number."

Ashley said that she was generally willing to trust that voters are who they say they are, but still offered the option of asking for identification as a means to confirm this. "I would say

98% of the time the match is pretty clearly the same person. I just haven't had any doubt about it. If someone has a signature that is more like a scratch on something rather than an actual signing, we just have to trust that it is the same person... If we have any questions we may want to ask them for an ID, which we can do."

Janet said that she did not really worry too much about mismatching signatures, and told me that even field investigators—individuals who come in to check on poll workers and audit processes throughout the day—did not seem to challenge them too much. "People change their signatures," Janet said. "Mine doesn't always look the same. I am not going to sit there and argue with them. That is pretty much all you can do. I don't stress it. Sometimes the field investigators will come in and pull up the last person who voted to see their paperwork. They look them up to verify their signatures, but just let it go through."

Janet did say that she would sometimes ask for an ID to confirm that a voter lived in the neighborhood or if a voter had a name that was difficult to look up. "Sometimes I tell people, 'Can I see your ID?' Because their names are all over the place... they have difficult names. So I will ask if they have anything with their name on it."

Alice was not a respondent who mentioned whether or not she asked for ID in the case of questionable signatures, but did talk about how she helped voters out by showing them the signatures on file in the poll book and asking them to sign as they did when they registered. She did not seem aware of any official procedure poll workers were supposed to follow in the case of signatures that didn't appear to match.

Alice: Let's say they write out their full name, and when they come to the table they only write their initial, so then you'll just ask them, 'I need you to write out your full name just like you did when you registered.' It hasn't been a real issue.

MSL: You mentioned there were two voters in elections last week where you had to ask them about their signatures?

Alice: One was an older lady, her daughter always accompanies her, so I was sort of wondering... so I asked the daughter, "Did you register for her?" With the handwriting... she has had two strokes. I knew they were legit. Let's say anyone audited that, it was so glaring, that is why I asked. You know how sometimes people when they sign their name, they are going to put almost like a doctor's signature. When she registered her name was very readable, so we just had her sign like [she] did when [she] registered.

### *Signature Matching and Provisional Ballots*

Provisional ballots came up in a number of my conversations about confirming voter eligibility, and poll workers are required to offer one to any challenged voter—including those who cannot provide adequate information to confirm their identity from the poll workers' perspectives. The use of provisional ballots seemed to vary from poll worker to poll worker, however. For example, Lauren had her own way of checking in voters and confirming eligibility that involved using provisional ballots as a failsafe. She said she would ask voter voters how they signed when they registered even though this was, according to her, not something she was supposed to do. She would ask voters, "What did you use to sign when you are registered to vote?" If they say they used an ID card, she compared the signature on the ID card with the signature on file to see if the signature matched. If the signature did not match, she said she felt it was necessary to provide voters with a provisional ballot.

"One of the situations we had was a male who had registered for the army," she told me. "When he went to register to vote, he forgot which signature he used. He had two different types of signatures. He confessed that himself. He had two different types of signatures, so he

presented two different kinds of identifications with those signatures on it. He was still offered a provisional ballot just in case because we didn't want to have anything go wrong.”

In contrast to Lauren's willingness to use provisional ballots as a failsafe against mistakes, however, Patricia said she had been told to avoid provisional ballots at all costs during training. “The signature match is not a big deal,” Patricia said. “The complicated thing is... there are people who fall through the cracks and have to be issued a provisional ballot... And what I was told at training was you do everything in your power to avoid giving a provisional ballot. And that is not realistic, but that is what you try to do. They even told us to go so far as to send people home to get a piece of mail rather than issue a provisional ballot. I think this is because provisional ballots make more work at the end of the night. They get counted differently, and it changes the numbering throughout the day. It is a pain in the neck. Provisional ballots can be dicey.”

Jake said that he ran across a number of problems with mismatching signatures that necessitated he ask for identification, but also emphasized how the decision-making process about a voter's eligibility was a collective decision among the judges working. He observed that with older voters' signatures match quite well, whereas younger voters “tend to scribble.”

“This makes it harder for me,” he explained, “because then I have to ask for ID... If someone's signature just does not match and they can't provide us with ID, we would issue them a provisional ballot.”

“I guess the most challenging part is when people don't sign how they normally would,” Jake continued. “That raises questions to me, and then I usually check with a few other judges or an election coordinator. A few times I have had someone just completely scribble. They got mad at me when I asked for their ID. I explained the circumstances, and then they were fine.”

There one poll worker who stood out for having such a strict interpretation of the signature matching requirement that—as she told it—would deny voters access to the ballot entirely as a result. Although she did say she was willing to offer some encouragement to voters who had trouble providing a similar signature to what was on file in the poll book, she also discussed instances where she and her fellow poll workers had rejected signatures and turned away voters. She described what she perceived to be behavior that indicated a prospective voter may be fraudulently trying to vote.

MSL: Has there ever been an instance where you were checking a signature and it doesn't match?

Sandra: I found a lot of irregularities. I think most of them were caught, and they were asked not to vote.

MSL: Did anyone give you pushback?

Sandra: They would devise answers to cover their behavior. By the time I realized an irregularity, I would call the administrator. They would tell me all kinds of stories about why it doesn't match, why my address is different, whatever.

MSL: So you were pretty strict about enforcing the signature identification?

Sandra: Yes.

The aspect of Sandra's response that stands out in particular is her observation that voters who were "caught" were asked not to vote. As highlighted by other poll workers I interviewed, under Illinois election law and the Federal Help America Vote Act, voters who have their eligibility challenged must be given an opportunity to cast a provisional ballot and provide

evidence of their eligibility.<sup>10</sup> It's not clear whether the voters whose signatures Sandra rejected were ultimately turned away completely or offered a provisional ballot by the polling site administrator, but her response illustrates the potential level of authority and discretion poll workers have in making determinations about the validity of information provided by voters.

While Sandra was the only poll worker who offered me such a restrictive interpretation of Illinois' state election code during her interview, there were poll workers who said they observed others being similarly restrictive in their enforcement of the signature matching provision in Illinois' election law. Linda told me about a time when a poll worker in her precinct took issue with certain voters' signatures in a way that echoed Sandra's perspective on mismatching signatures. "Now there was a person who was a judge in our precinct two times ago," Linda told me. "It was the first time she was a judge and she was working as a Republican judge. She took issue...I wouldn't have done it, but it was her right to do that. And that was because what had been clear, the signature, was now not clear."

With the exception of Sandra, none of the other Chicago respondents expressed that a proper course of action in response to encountering a mismatching signature would be to simply turn the voter away entirely. At the same time, poll workers vary in how they navigate questionable signature matches. All poll workers except Sandra noted the option of providing voters with provisional ballots in the case where workers did not feel they could adequately confirm a voter's identity, although relying on provisional ballots as a "fail safe" for otherwise eligible voters, as some respondents indicated, is also problematic given that there can be variation in the counting of provisional ballots (Kimball et al 2006). Moreover, even with

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<sup>10</sup> 10 ILCS 5/18A-5. Sec 18A-5L: Provisional voting, general provisions; Pub. Law 107-252 § 303; 42 U.S.C. § 14853

provisional ballots poll workers have some discretion in supporting or going against a voter's claim to be an eligible voter. According to Linda: "We had somebody, maybe it was 3 or 4 elections ago, who was in the wrong precinct. And what the [poll worker's] handbook said at the time was that you can let them vote provisionally, and when they fill out that affidavit to vote provisionally, there is a judge who takes the ballot and writes 'I support or I do not support the application to vote provisionally.' Now how much influence that has ultimately, I don't know, but the judge does make a statement, 'Yes, this person should vote provisionally or not.'"<sup>11</sup>

*Working in the Same Precinct and with the Same People Over Time*

One unexpected pattern that came up with poll workers who regularly worked elections was how much working in the same precinct over time helped them with the process of identifying voters. Many told me specifically that serving the same voters over time gave them more confidence in confirming the eligibility of a voter whose signature may have changed substantially. "I've been doing Election Day voting a long time," Dave told me. "It's a lot of the same people. I'm pretty good at remembering faces if not names. So for me even if a signature might not match today, I remember them from last time, and we were good then."

Lisa also mentioned how working in the same neighborhood streamlines the decisions she makes when evaluating a voter's signature. "I know the person and I know who they are," she offered. "But again, if those signatures don't match, we can find alternative ways to make sure that it matches up really well. It may not be perfect, but you can see where somebody is making the same N." Even for poll workers who were new to the process or had only served one or two elections told me how working in their home neighborhood, where they might know a

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<sup>11</sup> In the most recent version of the manual for Chicago poll workers, there is a section on the provisional ballot affidavit where poll workers may (though are not required to) ask the voter for or provide themselves information that supports or opposes the eligibility of the person to vote.

number of the voters coming in, helped make the process easier as they learned the ropes of the position.

Not surprisingly, several respondents spoke of problems with their fellow poll workers, for example, dealing with “personality” differences, poll workers who did not seem to know what they were doing, and those who were not doing their share of work. Others, however, told me that consistently working with the same people from election to election could make the day run more smoothly and actually be enjoyable, especially if the team was well trained and compatible. Marie, for example, told me she felt she worked in a very friendly environment. “It’s a lot of fun. I really enjoy doing it. We just enjoy it. We work together very well.” Harriet also said that working with the same people allowed them to be “in sync” in the work. She mentioned a particularly difficult election where there were only two poll workers who showed up. Because it was someone she knew, however, she said the day was ultimately successful. “We knew what we had to accomplish. We knew who would do what job,” she said. Like Harriet, Rick also suggested that working with the same people allowed them to develop a sense of consistency. “I’d say it definitely helps to have the same group of people because you know each other’s abilities and strengths. You kind of know where you need to help out, and where they’ll be able to help you out.

MSL: So would you say you establish a set of norms as a group?

Rick: Yes. And having been with the same group of people three times, it feels like we have that colleague / co-worker relationship.

Anderson also suggested that working with the same people allowed them to establish something like a clear set of norms and processes in their work. “The past three elections I have worked with the same people,” he told me. We get along great. We are a very well-oiled

machine. Prior to that I worked in the same precinct where I lived which was about a block away. 3-4 elections ago I worked with the same people there. Then I got reassigned to this new place and I have done the past three elections with the same people. We all found our comfort zones and worked well together... I have a history now with the people I'm working with."

Even the poll workers who were not assigned to work with what they perceived as well-trained or incompatible co-workers suggested that it may still be better to work with the same people over time and know the weaknesses one was dealing with rather than deal with issues from new, unfamiliar co-workers.

MSL: Would you say it is easier when you can work with the same people from election to election?

James: It is hard to say. I would say for the two who are always there with me, I tend to think that they sometimes aren't very helpful. Here is the thing... it would be really nice if they were replaced by people who were a little more competent. But on the other hand, I am familiar with their particular brand of not knowing what to do. I am able to manage them because I already know what their weaknesses are, whereas someone new coming in might have as many problems. So it is really hard to say.

In jurisdictions across the country, poll workers are called upon to make judgements about whether or not a voter has provided adequate information to confirm their identity and eligibility to vote. This research identifies some of the criteria poll workers may use to evaluate voter eligibility in systems where they are asked to "match" or "compare" signatures, and how they navigate uncertainty about the identifying information provided by a voter. Although the Chicago poll worker manual instructs voters to ask for the last two digits of a voter's social security number in this situation, Illinois' election code is ambiguous enough as to what is meant

by “identifying information” that it may be that poll workers are instructed otherwise in training. In any case, the variation in poll worker responses to what to do with mismatching signatures echoes previous findings about the uneven application of voter identification laws (Atkeson et al 2014; Cobb et al 2012).

### **Discussion and Future Steps**

This paper contributes to our understanding of the implementation aspect of laws for identifying voters through in-depth interviews with poll workers in Chicago, Illinois. These interviews give us a sense of what actually constitutes poll workers’ decision-making process, the kinds of considerations they make, and how they deal with questionable information provided by voters. Not surprisingly given the potential for subjectivity in evaluating something as variable as a signature, there were differences in what respondents looked for when comparing signatures, as well as how they responded to signatures that did not, from their perspective, constitute an adequate match. There also seemed to be variation in the guidance given to poll workers in training, although by and large respondents suggested that there was not a whole lot of focus on the signature matching process, but rather on technical aspects of the job such as setting up, using, and breaking down machinery.

While this evidence may raise concerns about situations where poll workers have substantial discretion in their verification of voter eligibility—particularly in states where they are examining information as capricious as signatures—they also offer some insight on potential solutions to the problems inherent in the “human element” of elections. The idea that working in the same precinct and with the same co-workers over time (especially if it is near where one lives) makes the process of verifying voter eligibility easier deserves closer empirical scrutiny. For example, when I asked one poll worker, Nicholas, what he felt the most positive aspects of

his work was, he responded that he felt the “whole experience of doing it is rewarding for the soul. I think there is a personal benefit, but also a benefit for the community because you are not going to try to do wrong to the people that you know better than a stranger.” This suggests there may be a pro-social motivation to ensure positive experiences for the voters poll workers see from election to election, especially if they are one’s neighbors.

Having poll workers serve in the same precinct in their home neighborhood from election to election is certainly not a panacea, but if implemented in an intentional way, over time it may allow for a group of otherwise temporary, volunteer-like workers to develop informal organizational norms and systems of accountability. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that familiarity with voters may also lead to a willingness to overlook important steps in the voter identification process, and could exacerbate the principle-agent problem faced by election administrators if poll workers develop systems that deviate from what is laid out in poll worker training. Future research should examine whether things like poll worker consistency across precincts from election to election, as well as having poll workers work in their home neighborhood, affect the application of voter identification laws, polling place incidents, and overall poll worker performance.

Though this paper itself does not address the issue of whether poll workers are more likely to question the eligibility of some voters over others—for example minority over white voters—there is evidence from other research that this does in fact happen in polling places (Atkeson et al 2014; Cobb et al 2012). This raises concerns about situations where poll workers have substantial discretion—as was illustrated among Chicago poll workers—in both deciding whether or not a voter’s provided information matches well enough to confirm a voter’s identity, as well as how to proceed if it does not. In light of the findings presented here, these questions

deserve closer scrutiny from a positivist perspective. It is my hope that the evidence from these interviews will inform studies of poll workers that look to examine these street-level bureaucrats through a more positivist lens by generating hypotheses to be tested about poll worker decisions, and suggesting new ways to measure their performance.

## Appendix

### Interview Protocol Template<sup>12</sup>

I am going to start by asking you a few background questions

1. Did you serve as a [POLL WORKER] in the elections on [DATE] in [STATE]
  1. If yes, was this your first time serving as a [POLL WORKER]
  2. If no, how many elections have you served as a [POLL WORKER]
    - i. Why did you decide to start serving as a [POLL WORKER]?
    - ii. For what kinds of elections (presidential, mid-term, local) have you served as a [POLL WORKER]?
2. Why did you decide to serve as a [POLL WORKER]?
3. In what roles have you served during your work as a poll worker?
4. Are you satisfied with the training you have received, or would you like changes to be made?
5. Have you had any issues with being understaffed?
6. What kind of oversight happens during your work? Does anyone come to check on your work throughout the day?
7. What do you consider the major challenges that [POLL WORKERS] face? [PROBE: Any others?][PROBE: Which of these have been the most salient to you in your time as a [POLL WORKER]
8. What are some of the positive aspects of your experiences as a [POLL WORKER]?

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<sup>12</sup> This interview template is adaptable to states with different voting requirements. Many states also refer to their poll workers by different titles (e.g. “election judge” or “election officer”). The protocol may be adjusted accordingly.

I study election laws and voting, but I am especially interested decision making by individuals in charge of enforcing election laws. Now, I am going to switch gears a little and ask you about your experiences making decisions as an election officer.

9. I've been really interested in the decision-making process when confirming prospective voters' eligibility.
  1. How would you describe the way eligibility is confirmed your precinct?
  2. Have there ever been instances where you were unsure of a voter's eligibility  
[PROBE: What did you do?][PROBE: How did you decide what to do?][PROBE: What kinds of things did you consider?]
  3. Would you categorize the current laws for determining voter eligibility to be sufficient for ensuring the integrity of elections in [STATE]?
10. One issue that has gotten a lot of mass media attention is the adoption of voter identification laws across a number of states in the United States. Do you have an opinion on these laws you would like to share?
11. How do you see your relationship to voters?
12. Would you say you feel like a part of the democratic process? [If no, PROBE: Why not? If yes, PROBE: Do you feel like an important part of the democratic process?]
13. We've gotten to talk about a number of different issues, but before we close, is there anything we haven't talked about you think I should know?

Summary Statistics- Ward / Interview Information

<b>Ward</b>	<b># Interviews</b>	<b>% White (in ward)</b>	<b>% Black (in ward)</b>	<b>% Asian (in ward)</b>	<b>%Hispanic/Latino (in ward)</b>
1	2	54.7	5.0	4.0	33.7
4	1	22.1	61.0	9.6	4.4
6	1	1.0	95.9	0.1	1.9
14	1	13.0	1.1	2.8	82.9
24	1	2.9	83.4	0.3	12.5
38	2	64.1	1.7	4.8	27.8
39	3	52.5	2.4	17.7	24.1
42	4	68.5	4.5	18.6	5.8
45	3	61.8	1.3	8.0	26.3
47	1	76.1	2.4	5.8	12.0
48	7	53.8	14.9	12.5	15.6

## Summary Respondent Demographics

### *Party Identification*

<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Republican</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>N</b>
14 (53%)	5 (19%)	6 (23%)	1 (0.4%)	26

### *Gender*

<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>N</b>
10 (38%)	16 (62%)	26

### *Race*

<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Native American</b>	<b>N</b>
22 (84%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	1(4%)	26

### *Hispanic / Latino*

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N</b>
4 (15%)	22 (85%)	26

### *Employment*

<b>Full Time</b>	<b>Part Time</b>	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>Student</b>	<b>Retired</b>	<b>Disabled</b>	<b>N</b>
10 (38%)	5 (19%)	1(4%)	1 (4%)	6 (23%)	3 (12%)	26

*Education*

<b>Some High School</b>	<b>Completed High School</b>	<b>Some College</b>	<b>Associate's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate Degree</b>	<b>N</b>
2 (8%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	1(4%)	11 (42%)	6 (23%)	26

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