Documenting and Addressing Harassment of Election Officials

Frontline Workers for Democracy

JUNE 9TH, 2021
The content described in this presentation is violent and may be disturbing.
FOR ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS, DEATH THREATS HAVE BECOME PART OF THE JOB
NEXTGOV, AUG. 21, 2020

HERE ARE THE THREATS TERRORIZING ELECTION WORKERS
NY TIMES, DEC. 3, 2020

HIGH PROFILE ELECTIONS OFFICIALS LEAVE POSTS AFTER A TUMULTUOUS 2020
CNN, FEB. 19, 2021
OVERVIEW

6 States

11 Election Officials
5 men, 6 women

8 Election Experts
Academics, journalists, and voter advocates
RESEARCH INTENTIONS

UNDERSTAND EXPERIENCES

COMPREHEND IMPACT

BRAINSTORM RECOMMENDATIONS
**ELECTION STRUCTURE**

**State Level**
Chief Election Official (CEO)
- Varies state by state
- Eg. Secretary of State
- Eg. Lieutenant Governor

**Local Level**
Local Election Official (LEO)
- Many different titles
- Eg. County Clerk
- Eg. Registrar of Voters
Growing complexities of election administration

Elections as critical infrastructure

Gender, Mis- and Disinformation
- 75% of local election officials are women
  - Misogyny

Chronic underfunding of elections

Defining a threat

BACKGROUND
Threats in the age of the internet

• Election officials may experience harassment differently from the average internet user.
• On the internet, without the physical clues of facial expression and larger context, speech could easily be misinterpreted as a threat.
10 out of 11 election officials interviewed due to their experiences receiving death threats, other threats, or abusive language.

- 4 reported death threats
- 7 reported other threats
- 6 reported abusive language
People in my office were threatened to be shot, threatened to be beaten, and so this is what we were going through...

Many officials saw speaker intent as a key factor in whether aggressive speech is merely a complaint or potentially illegal threats and harassment.

Differences in the way that election officials defined the term “harassment” indicate a deeper, societal problem with the term (and the act) of harassment: people, especially people in positions of authority, do not want to be seen as weak or impacted by the actions of others who intend to do harm.
FINDINGS

Key Findings

Ø Trauma, stress, and anxiety were reported as impacts of the harassment experienced by election officials, but officials want to project strength.

"I couldn't stop dreaming about elections and about terrible things happening, so I was a little bit traumatized."

"The election cycle of 2020 was the most contentious, traumatic experience of my professional life."
For officials who contacted law enforcement agencies in response to threats or harassment, there was **no discernable follow up**.

I probably got more than 25 death threats... I got a guy and, frankly, more than one... who left one on my voicemail and he said who he was and his phone number. I forwarded it to law enforcement... there was no discernable follow up.
Key Findings

- **Threats** to members of Congress are on the rise

- **Unknowns:**
  We don’t know what the level of harassment is across all sectors but can see in the public sector health care officials, election officials and elected politicians have all been targeted.
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Predicting a **mass exodus** of election officials

Institutional **knowledge**

Recognizing the **professionalism** of the field

"[If] what happened in 2020 continues to happen on a regular basis we're going to fall apart from within."
Essential Politics: California’s election official exodus
Los Angeles Times, April 12, 2021

Head of San Luis Obispo elections responds to “Inexcusable racial slur” during voting debate
KEYT, May 5, 2021

Election officials faced ‘unprecedented harassment’ during Anchorage mayor’s runoff
Anchorage Daily News, May 27, 2021
STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

REDUCE CONFLICT

BUILD CAPACITY
1. PUBLIC EDUCATION

Improve public education to combat mis- and disinformation

- Foster lines of communication between election officials and local journalists.
- Diversify confidence-building measures by investing in civics education and funding of nonprofits that promote voter education.
- Encourage social media companies to support election officials through access to free advertising and streamlined user verification for election officials.
- Urge social media companies to take more responsibility for mis- and disinformation spread on their platforms.
2. LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE

Strengthen law enforcement response to incidents of harassment

- Encourage election officials to consult with local prosecutors when dealing with threats.
- Provide security details to election offices where officials feel threatened or unsafe.
- Consider “knock and talk” tactics.
3. FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Expand **funding and resources** for election administration

- Provide sufficient and ongoing funding for elections from both the federal and state levels of government.
- Expand the talent pool for election administration.
- Designate funding for mental health resources for officials impacted by harassment, especially those impacted by gendered or racialized harassment.
4. LEGAL PROTECTION

Strengthen legal protection for election officials

- Develop legislation to protect election officials by making it easier for them to pursue legal action in response to death threats and other threats.

- Explore the expansion of federal law to address interference in any election.

- Start a repository within the federal government to collect and document threats against election officials and coordinate responses to such threats.
5. CROSS-SECTOR NETWORK

Build a cross-sector network of support for election officials

- Foster collaboration between academics, nonprofits, journalists, foundations, social media companies and other advocates to provide support for election officials.
- Focus on both in-kind and monetary support for the profession of election administration.
ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

Local election infrastructure is critical infrastructure.

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

PROTECTING ELECTION OFFICIALS FROM DIGITAL THREATS

THE ROAD FORWARD

What happened in 2020 and where do we go from here?

THE LONG FUSE:
MISINFORMATION AND THE 2020 ELECTION

RUNNING ELECTIONS WITHOUT FEAR
Ensuring Physical Safety for Election Personnel

Issued by The Elections Group
The report and slide deck are available at:

www.calvoter.org/harassment

Thank you to Craig Newmark Philanthropies whose support for the California Voter Foundation made the publication and release of this report possible.

Special thanks to:
Kim Alexander & Cathy Darling Allen, California Voter Foundation
Chris Hoofnagle, UC Berkeley School of Law

Grace Gordon, Master of Development Practice (MDP)
grace_gordon@berkeley.edu
- Website: [www.calvoter.org](http://www.calvoter.org)
- Twitter: [@CalVoter](http://twitter.com/CalVoter)
- Facebook: [facebook.com/CalVoter](http://facebook.com/CalVoter)
- [Youtube Channel](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVoter)

[CalVoter Foundation](http://www.calvoter.org)