



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

CENTER for DEMOCRACY & ELECTION MANAGEMENT



Poll Worker Program Final Report 11-30-06

American University (AU)'s Center for Democracy and Election Management (CDEM) received a grant of \$16,000 from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's Help America Vote College Program to recruit, train, and place more than 100 AU students as precinct technicians and poll workers at Washington, D.C. polling places for the November 7, 2006 general election. This program strove to educate them in the electoral process through a first-hand experience and at the same time ensure fully-staffed and smoothly-running polling places in the nation's capital that day.

The AU poll worker program is part of CDEM's larger, longer-term effort to signal the importance of civic education and participation among the entire AU community, students at other universities, and the general public in the United States. CDEM is pleased that its endeavors to educate and involve more than 100 AU students in the election were successful and could become a model for other universities striving for similar results.

Recruitment Success

A number of factors helped bring about a recruitment success. CDEM's extensive publicity of the opportunity to be poll workers galvanized the support of AU's student body. CDEM widely publicized the poll worker program weeks before the start of fall classes at AU. CDEM staff participated in "Involvement Fairs" to reach out directly to students, posted catchy and creative flyers all over campus, and conducted meetings with the leadership of several student organizations like the AU Student Government, the Residence Hall Association, the Honors Student Board, College Democrats, and College Republicans. CDEM also utilized campus media like the AU student newspaper the *Eagle* and information technology vehicles like email list-servs to communicate with students directly about the poll worker opportunity.

A new Web page was created to complement the student poll worker project in mid-August. It can be accessed at www.american.edu/ia/cdem/workthepolls/index.cfm and is linked to CDEM's Web site. The new page captured contact information from AU students who were interested in working at the polls. Over 600 AU students viewed the page with over 300 submitting their contact information into the on-line form. More than 200 individual students downloaded the application. In the end, CDEM and the DC BOEE trained 104 AU students to work the polls on November 7th. This response signaled college students' willingness to take a full day off from class, work and personal commitments to work a long day in the polls, a refreshing reminder of the eagerness of American young people to volunteer. In addition, their observations have been invaluable in determining the freedom and fairness of DC elections.

The support of AU administration, faculty, and staff was also instrumental the program's ultimate success. CDEM Director, Dr. Robert Pastor championed the program to interested faculty and encouraged them to announce the poll worker program in classes. On September 20, with AU's Center for Presidential and Congressional Studies (CPCS), CDEM co-sponsored a panel presentation that encouraged students to find ways to contribute to democracy. Dr. Pastor spoke about conducting elections and how audience members could keep the elections fair – by becoming poll workers. Further, AU is committed to researching how the poll worker program can be integrated into the curriculum in order to enhance the educational experience of working the polls. AU will continue to draw on generous administration and faculty support in these endeavors for the Presidential Election in 2008.

Training

In mid-October, more than 100 students were trained by DC BOEE and CDEM staff at mandatory three-hour session at American University. Students were taught election basics and given training on troubleshooting the electronic voting machines. They were also given T-Shirts that CDEM designed specifically to distinguish AU's poll workers. The shirts featured Uncle Sam on the front, in blue and white, with the message "Your Country Needs You!". The back featured the following language: "...to keep our elections free & fair. Be a poll worker." The back also listed American University, the Center for Democracy and Election Management, and the CDEM Web site address. Though a majority of students found the technological training adequate, they did offer criticisms and suggestions for the improvement of poll worker training in general.

Students specifically asked for more training on the electoral process, election rules and regulations, and a more hands-on approach. College poll workers need better training because they are eager to be of service. They are quick learners and technologically savvy. One student said, "For the tasks that I had to do, I had sufficient training, but I wish I had a better idea of how the election process in D.C. works so that I could answer specific voter questions". AU is committed to partnering with the DC BOEE in the future to better train college poll workers and general poll workers alike. Electoral agencies and institutions could benefit from partnerships with civic-minded colleges and universities.

Program Evaluation: More than Poll Workers

The AU poll worker program succeeded in supplying the District of Columbia with a large group of technologically-savvy and highly motivated poll workers, who could provide a service to their community while engaging in a vital learning experience. In addition, we sought to use our students – most whom were new to the voting process – as election observers, in order to gain fresh perspectives we could use as part of our larger project to learn about and improve the election process in the United States. We accomplished the second of these goals by having students fill out an online survey questionnaire designed to evaluate their experience as poll workers while giving CDEM insights into the functioning of DC elections. Their comments have proven insightful and invaluable.

The questions CDEM asked are listed below:

- What specific duties did you perform on Election Day?
- Was the training you received adequate for the tasks you were asked to perform?
- Did your polling place experience any problems?
- Was your polling place fully staffed?
- On the whole, was the polling place in which you worked a satisfactory place for D.C. voters to cast their ballots?
- On the whole, how would you rate your experience with AU's Work the Polls project? Please use a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most positive.
- Explain how we might go about making the experience more rewarding in future elections.

D.C. law prohibits non-D.C. residents from being 'poll workers' like Ballot Clerks. Maryland and Virginia would not work with AU to provide poll workers because of similar laws. The DC BOEE should be commended for amending their rules to allow AU poll workers a chance to participate in the democratic process. Fortunately for them, AU poll workers fulfilled a range of duties on Election Day outside their defined responsibility as 'poll technicians'.

Among many other duties, AU students assisted voters with filling out paper ballots and with using touch-screen voting machines. They directed voters to their appropriate polling places and helped disabled voters with curbside voting. They aided non-English speaking voters cast their ballots, fixed optical scan machines when they jammed, and re-calibrated the electronic voting machines when they froze. AU students were Election Day jacks of all trades.

Problems and Solutions

More than half of AU students reported problems in their polling places, specifically with voting technology. Almost all of those students mentioned that the problems were severe enough to have resulted in votes not being counted, people being discouraged from voting, or voters being left distrustful of the system. Referring to these problems one student said, "People were forced to wait for incredible periods of time (sometimes over an hour) to use a machine that kept freezing after every five or six voters. Many of them did not believe that their vote was truly being counted". Students reported numerous instances of optical scan machines jamming, electronic voting machines freezing or becoming inoperable, and the stilted and uneven response from the DC BOEE. CDEM is committed to highlighting these problems in a constructive manner so they may be addressed for the Presidential Election in 2008.

Over half the students mentioned that their polling place was fully staffed or even over-staffed. The other half of students complained that poll workers did not show up for work on Election Day, which negatively affected the running of the polling place. This occurrence gave some students an insight into how important and taken for granted poll workers truly are. Voters expect as given that knowledgeable, well-trained poll workers will be at their polling place to assist them on Election Day and grow angry when the opposite occurs. CDEM is fully committed to continuing to provide poll workers for D.C. elections and will lobby to extend the program to Maryland and Virginia by 2008.

A majority of students found their polling place to be satisfactory for use by D.C. voters. Some were said to be too small and some were said to be too big, but overall the students found them acceptable. The students were more concerned with the level of training and technological expertise in their fellow D.C. poll workers. On the whole, average poll workers are 72 years old. In all likelihood, they have devoted many years to being poll workers and some may be set in their ways. CDEM is concerned as are many organizations like the US Electoral Assistance Commission and the League of Women Voters about how best to interact with and train older poll workers. It appears as though injecting a breath of fresh air, in the form of a college poll worker, into the polling place has been a positive first step. On the whole, AU students were greeted warmly by D.C. poll workers happy to see youthful civic energy.

Seventy-two percent of students rated their poll worker experience positively. Yet, the student's experiences were colored negatively by the DC BOEE failure to assign precincts for students early and with plenty of time for them to plan accordingly. The DC BOEE sent out precinct assignments as late as the morning of Monday, November 6th, less than 24 hours before students were supposed to show up for work. As a result of this logistical failure, around 10 students dropped out of the program while many were compelled to go to precincts that were more than an hour away, difficult to locate, or even dangerous for young students unaccustomed to the city. Some students were reprimanded by their precinct captains for not arriving at their polling place Monday night for a late walk-through and training session.

The communication failure on the part of the DC BOEE badly colored student experiences and may have driven off students from working the polls in the future. The DC BOEE also failed to properly prepare students for other logistical concerns like food, the long hours to be worked, and directions to the polling places. One student combined a few criticisms and wrote, "I would highly recommend a more "hands-on" training... Besides receiving my precinct assignment only 24 hours before Election Day, I arrived feeling very unprepared. The precinct captain and many workers went to the precinct on Monday evening to prepare it for the following morning. I think that the students/poll workers should be required to help on Monday night. Not only would they have the opportunity to meet their precinct captain, but they would get a better sense of the precinct setup and a clearer idea of the voting process".

The Big Picture

The Carter-Baker Commission on Federal Election Reform, chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker, made 87 separate recommendations in its September 2005 report that would restore confidence in our electoral system and help guarantee free and fair elections. Some of the recommendations relate directly to poll workers, for example jurisdictions should increase poll worker salaries, and allow them to work shifts and part-time hours to better handle busy periods and better fit into the schedules of prospective workers. AU students repeatedly expressed confusion about why they had to remain in the polling place the entire day and why the polling place could not staff *up* during busy times like at the opening and closing of the polls and staff *down* during quieter hours like the middle of the day. The experiences of AU poll workers only served to convince CDEM that these remain sound recommendations.

CDEM will continue to strive to tap into the well-spring of youthful civic energy and commitment to service in the AU student body. Some of the lessons learned from this experience with recruiting, training, and surveying college poll workers will invariably lead to improvements for

the 2008 Election cycle. In particular, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and any universities designing college poll worker programs in the future should look carefully at the election calendar and consider the timing of the primary and general elections. The D.C. primary on September 12 allowed no time to recruit and train poll workers after the start of school in late August. As a result, AU students did not play as integral a role as they might have, which perhaps contributed to the delay by the board in assigning our students to polling places.

More importantly, jurisdictions should follow D.C.'s example and welcome all citizens to work the polls, not just people registered to vote in the jurisdiction. We were effectively precluded from working with counties in Maryland and Virginia because so few of our students are registered to vote there. In fact, states and D.C. should take the additional step of opening the entire range of poll worker responsibilities to non-residents. Restricting poll worker duty to only registered voters, and restricting them to servicing voting machines, is out-dated in our mobile society, particularly in such a dynamic metropolitan area. AU students benefited greatly from the opportunity to fulfill the entire range of poll worker duties on Election Day.

Student comments remind those of us who are election veterans just how antiquated our laws and procedures have become. Why don't we allow poll workers to leave the polling place for meals? Do we really need the same number of poll workers in the polling place all day, when most voters arrive early in the morning, late in the afternoon or at lunch time? Are our election rules written in such a way that they can be easily and uniformly applied by poll workers with only the briefest of training? Why do our polling places lack uniform procedures for documenting problems and voter complaints, such as a log book, depriving election administrators of a critical source of feedback? Why are non-partisan, independent observers generally not allowed in polling places either during voting hours or more importantly after hours during reconciliation?

Commitment to Moving Forward

In conclusion, poll worker experiences on Election Day 2006 suggest both the gravity of the challenges facing the American electoral system and some possible paths toward meeting those challenges. CDEM will move forward on various fronts to bring students new opportunities to receive academic credit for working the polls, build the experience into curriculum, and establish deeper partnerships with AU faculty and staff so that everyone may have the opportunity to fulfill their civic duty. CDEM also wants to maintain its constructive relationship with the DC BOEE and other local governments in order to provide enhanced poll worker education and training.

CDEM's college poll worker program was a positive step toward meeting the chronic shortfall in poll workers for American elections, and introduced a large number of young people to greater involvement in the electoral process. On a larger scale, our experience suggests that opening the voting process to public scrutiny, improving poll worker recruitment and training, and building administrative capacity at the local and state levels are all vital steps to rebuilding public confidence in our democracy. We at the Center for Democracy and Election Management look forward to working toward these goals for the next Election cycle. The life-blood of the AU college poll worker program are the students themselves and we hope to continue having fruitful and meaningful relationships with the student body so that we can continue to provide them opportunities to build and shape their democracy.