



Ethical Frontlines

Impartiality Challenges Facing Local Election Officials

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Executive Summary

In the years following the 2020 presidential election, local election officials (LEOs) have operated in an environment marked by increasingly toxic polarization, misinformation, and public distrust. While much public attention has rightly focused on threats and harassment directed at election workers, less attention has been paid to the subtler—but pervasive—political pressures that complicate ethical decision-making in the profession. **This report examines those pressures, the structural and legal vulnerabilities that give rise to them, and the potential changes many LEOs support to protect the integrity and impartiality of election administration.**

Drawing on 38 confidential interviews with county-level election officials in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Washington, and Virginia, and supplemented by prior discussions in Michigan and New Mexico, this report reveals ethical challenges local election officials encounter and offers suggestions for the training, legal reforms, and professional support structures that could make a meaningful difference.

Key Findings

1. Political pressure on local election officials is real—and complicated. Officials rarely reported being asked to break election laws but instead reported dangerous pressures to validate partisan narratives. They were urged to remain silent in the face of misinformation, signal party loyalty, or defend controversial actors within their party. They had to stand up to these pressures with courage and conviction.

2. Institutional design shapes ethical risk. The method by which LEOs attain office—partisan election, nonpartisan election, or appointment—influences the type and intensity of partisan pressure they experience. Officials elected in partisan contests reported the highest levels of party-based pressure. Appointed officials reported fewer direct pressures but noted that these dynamics can shift to party-controlled election boards. The United States is out of step with other modern democracies in allowing election officials to be elected in partisan contests, oversee elections in which they may be candidates, and fundraise for or endorse candidates appearing on their ballots. These types of features embed partisan incentives within election governance and create recurring ethical dilemmas.

3. Local election officials want greater distance from political parties. Many interviewees favored structural changes that would insulate their positions from partisan politics. In states with partisan elections for election officials, multiple interviewees wished those elections were nonpartisan (meaning elections with no party labels on the ballot). Some changed their party affiliation and chose to run as independents, even at risk of hurting their chances for reelection. Some appointed officials even abstained from voting in primary elections to avoid signaling party affiliation. In Virginia, the association of electoral boards responded to a wave of political problems by adopting tools to reinforce board member ethics—an example of how professional associations help stabilize norms under pressure.

4. Voluntary self-restraint is widespread but little known. When on the ballot themselves, many LEOs voluntarily recused from ballot handling, delegated sensitive roles, or avoided tabulation rooms. However, these actions are typically informal rather than codified in law or policy and not publicly communicated, limiting their trust-building value. Similarly, most interviewed officials opposed endorsing or fundraising for candidates in elections they oversee, even where permitted by law.

5. Professional culture matters. Many LEOs responded to the external political threats by doubling down on professionalism, impartial adherence to election law, and continuous improvement. State associations play a

crucial role in reinforcing this culture. In several states, interviewees described associations as the most likely entity to develop ethics guidance and arrange training that goes beyond legal compliance. However, resources and capacity vary widely.

6. Much of the available ethics training is insufficient and overly focused on compliance. While many LEOs receive general ethics training, they reported that it is typically oriented toward compliance with laws and regulations rather than partisan pressure or conflict-of-interest scenarios specific to election administration ethics. A few exceptions were noted, including the ethics course in The Election Center's certification program. Interviewed officials almost unanimously expressed strong interest in expanded ethics guidance. Lessons from the judiciary and accounting professions suggest that scenario-based training, advisory systems, and continuing ethics education can strengthen professional judgment.

7. Concern about "bad actors" is growing. Veteran officials expressed worry that high turnover in the profession and pernicious polarization could attract candidates motivated by partisan goals rather than public service. Structural guardrails and clearer ethical expectations are viewed as essential protections for the next generation of election administrators.

Recommendation Summary

The report's findings point to a central conclusion: safeguarding impartial election administration requires stronger professional infrastructure, clearer ethical guardrails, and legal and structural reforms that create greater distance between election administration and political parties. The report's 12 recommendations are organized into the following themes:

- Strengthening election official associations
- Expanding ethics training and peer support
- Mitigating conflicts of interest regarding political activity
- Mitigating conflicts of interest regarding officials on the ballot
- Depoliticizing election officials posts and election boards

America's local election officials operate on the ethical frontlines of our democracy. In a system that embeds but does not regulate partisan actors at multiple points, most officials demonstrate quiet restraint, professionalism, and dedication to impartiality—even at personal and political cost. However, reliance on individual virtue alone is insufficient. Durable public trust requires institutional support.

Reforms identified in this report can help turn down the heat surrounding election administration by strengthening ethical infrastructure, clarifying expectations, and insulating core administrative functions from unnecessary partisan incentives. The long-term health of election administration depends not only on secure systems and accurate counts, but on a professional workforce that is equipped, supported, and protected in its commitment to impartial service.

All findings and recommendations are discussed in greater detail in the full report that follows.

Preface

About Election Reformers Network

Election Reformers Network (ERN) strengthens election governance through policy research, awareness building, and reform advocacy. Drawing on decades of experience in the U.S. and abroad, the nonpartisan, nonprofit organization works to prevent election manipulation, protect election results, and support election officials. These priorities help correct U.S. governance flaws that can empower bad actors. ERN has backed successful governance innovations including conflict of interest prevention in Utah, redistricting reform in Missouri, Utah, and New Mexico, and certification reform in Arizona, Maine, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

The staff and board of ERN bring experience from prominent organizations including The Carter Center, Commission on Presidential Debates, Common Cause, Democracy International, Denver City and County Elections, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation, International Republican Institute, Issue One, National Democratic Institute, and the National Task Force on Election Crises.

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Methodology

This report aims to elucidate ethical challenges local election officials encounter and the training, reforms, and professional support structures that could make a meaningful difference. It draws upon 38 confidential interviews with county election leaders (i.e., clerks, auditors, supervisors) conducted between January and December 2025 in **Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, Washington**, plus additional discussions in **Michigan** and **New Mexico**. Participants consented to be interviewed after receiving ERN's invitation, which was distributed via email with support from the state associations. Association directors helped ERN recruit a mix of Democrats, Republicans, and—where applicable—independents. Additionally, the interviewees came from small, medium, and large counties. It is probable that at least some of the LEOs agreed to be interviewed *because* they had experienced ethical challenges in the workplace. ERN's focus was on the experiences of the county-based **chief election official** (not election staffers or poll workers), since this is a decision-making position often visibly affiliated with a political party, and therefore potentially vulnerable to partisan pressure.

Interviews with local election officials were designed to examine two central questions:

1. **What ethical issues and questions do election officials experience in their work?**
2. **What training and support do local election officials need to help them navigate ethical issues and questions?**

See Appendix B for the interview questionnaire.

The report also draws on a separate literature review and assessment of lessons learned from comparable professions.

STATE SELECTION

The project prioritized states in which LEOs are elected in partisan elections (Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and Washington), to assess how this selection method can give rise to ethics issues. ERN interviewed both LEOs and local electoral board members in Virginia to compare the dynamics where local election officials are appointed. The target states included a range of political contexts, such as current or recent battleground states (Arizona and Virginia), along with states controlled by one party (Colorado and Washington on the Democratic side, and Florida on the Republican side).

Lastly, the research model prioritized states with uniform, county-based local election jurisdictions to reduce complexity, and states where ERN and/or its advisory team have relationships with the state association of election officials to help facilitate the research.

A Job with Many Names

Each state selects its own title for Local Election Officials (LEOs), such as:

- County clerk
- County auditor
- County recorder
- Election supervisor
- General registrar

Regardless of their title, chief election officials at the county level hold extremely sensitive roles in U.S. election administration. They oversee voter registration, manage polling places, ensure the accuracy of vote counts, and implement state election laws at the local level.

See Appendix A for summary information about important difference in these positions across the research states.

Introduction

Why Ethical Challenges Facing Election Officials Demand Attention

In the years following the tumultuous presidential election of 2020, America’s election workforce faced a series of overlapping threats and challenges. The once sleepy realm of local election administration suddenly became the focal point of intense media attention and public scrutiny. Unfounded claims that the election had been stolen—a message amplified by some political leaders, news outlets, and social media—fueled widespread distrust in the electoral process. In many places, distrust translated into harassment, intimidation, and even death threats against election officials.

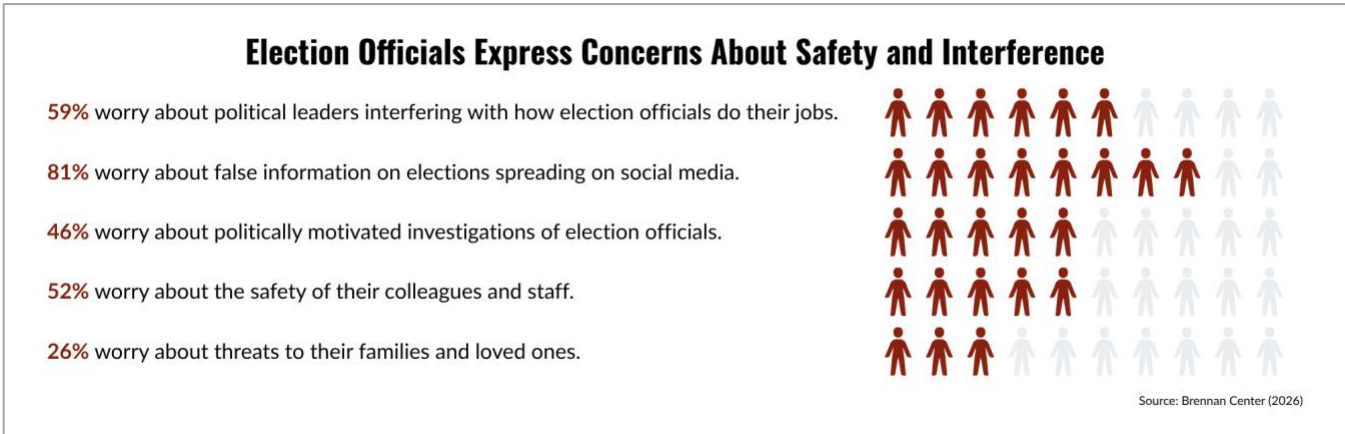


Figure 1: LEO Concerns on Safety and Interference

At the same time, the election workforce, already older on average, experienced a sharp rise in turnover. Local election administrators also found that the job demanded new skills in community engagement, media relations, and managing public records requests.

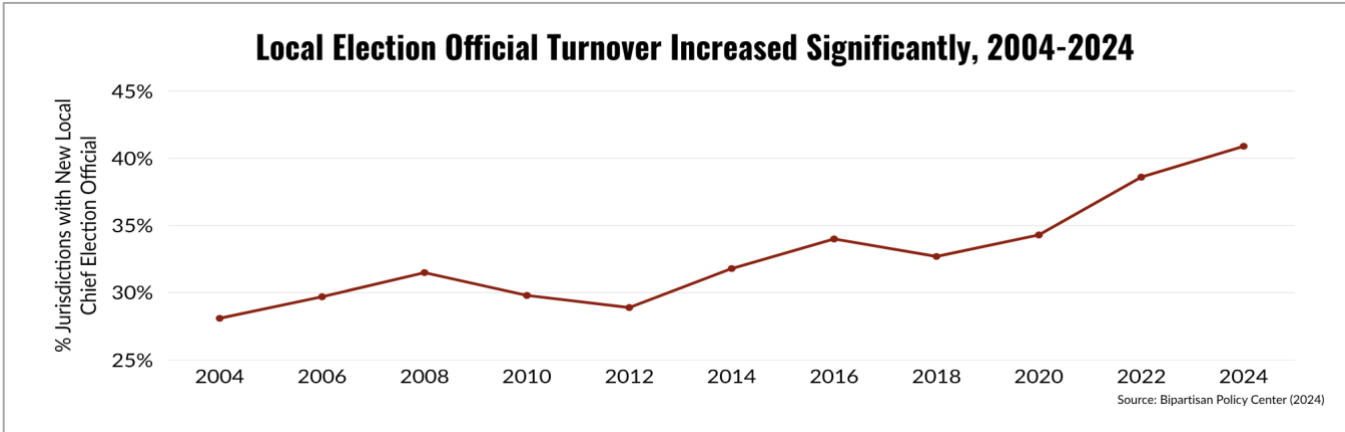


Figure 2: LEO Turnover, 2004–2024

Against this backdrop, ERN’s research into the ethical issues LEOs experience and the support they need, is particularly timely for two main reasons.

First, the United States’ distinctive, party-based approach to selecting election leadership creates more direct ties between election officials and competing political parties than is typical in other democracies. Twenty-five states elect their local election officials in partisan elections—and almost all states bring partisan politics into the process in one way or another. (See this report’s structure and policy challenges section as well as ERN’s [50-state breakdown](#) on LEO selection methods.)

Second, pernicious polarization has increased the risk of partisan attempts to manipulate election processes or outcomes. The politicization of election administration has eroded public confidence in elections and intensified scrutiny and pressures directed at election officials. Figure 3 illustrates that both Democrats and Republicans are less confident in the accuracy of vote counts when their side loses. This reality means that election officials must inspire faith in the system—especially to voters who are not in their political party.

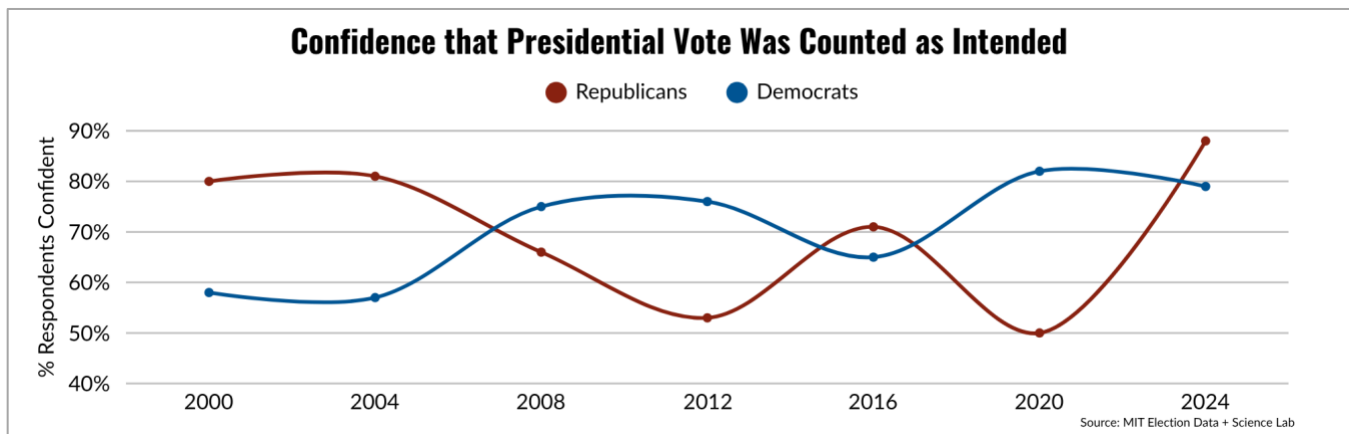


Figure 3: Voter Confidence in Election Results by Party

This hyper-partisan political context expands and complicates the judgment calls election officials face. For example:

- How should LEOs manage political pressures arising from their own party leaders and peers?
- What political actions, like endorsing or fundraising for candidates, are appropriate for election officials?
- What should LEOs do when members of their own party advance false information or wrongfully distrust elections?
- For those who run for current or future offices, how should LEOs approach campaigning and party relationships to avoid conflicts of interest with their official responsibilities?

There are few simple or universally correct answers to these questions, and laws provide little if any guidance. Election training in states rarely covers these thorny ethical topics, with state associations more likely to offer workshops on regulation and compliance than on ethical challenges.

What the Research Already Shows

Election administration scholarship has long emphasized that the rules, institutions, and administrative capacity surrounding elections shape voter experience and [system performance](#), especially through [technology](#), procedures, and [measurable administrative effectiveness](#). Within that tradition, researchers have treated local election officials as [frontline public administrators](#) whose incentives, discretion, and vulnerability to pressure are shaped by how they are selected and supervised.

In the wake of 2020, a growing body of work documents that election officials operate in a far more hostile and politicized environment than in prior decades, including [elevated threats](#), harassment, and concerns about political interference. All these dynamics contribute to workforce stress and turnover.

Other research highlights additional channels of pressure beyond direct intimidation, including “harassment-by-process,” such as [burdensome public records requests](#) that can consume staff time and increase operational and legal risk, and post-election conflict points such as [certification disputes](#). Scholars have also examined how partisanship can shape interactions with election offices, including [experimental evidence](#) suggesting LEOs may be more likely to respond to constituents who signal their partisan identity. Legal and institutional analyses further argue that the United States’ election system is [unusually “adversarial,”](#) with partisan incentives embedded in administrative processes and dispute pathways in ways that can intensify political pressure on administrators.

Taken together, this literature underscores both the reality of rising politicization and the importance of institutional design. This report contributes to that understanding by illuminating that many of the most consequential ethical pressures may be subtle, informal, and difficult to capture through compliance frameworks alone.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Election Officials Face Complex Challenges

Public scrutiny and national narratives—intensified by the current political environment—have become defining features of the work of local election officials (LEOs). The public is largely aware of *voter* hostility, thanks to media coverage of [prosecutions of violent intimidation](#), [threats against family members](#), and research documenting [unprecedented acts of hostility](#) toward LEOs.

However, far less attention has been paid to the localized partisan pressures directed at election officials from people or entities with partisan power, such as party chairs, election boards, or higher elected officials.

For this report, confidential first-hand interviews conducted across multiple states revealed that localized political pressures directed at election officials are real and consequential. Officials described repeated efforts to push them to take public positions about candidates, validate unfounded claims, or signal partisan allegiance in ways that could erode public confidence in elections.

Experiences that LEOs recounted included:

- Local party officials urging an LEO to falsely support claims of fraud in an election
- A US Senator calling—into the counting room—to ask the LEO to modify an election procedure
- A call from the county party chair to not certify elections
- A call from national party headquarters to extend early voting hours
- Getting primaried for not saying election was stolen
- Being sued—and having to pay their own legal fees—for certifying a race
- Calls from a county party to fire an election staffer

Here's the account of one official with nearly 20 years of election experience:

"I wouldn't [falsely] say the 2020 election was rigged, so my party ran someone against me. The hardest part is, when they come out against me, they're coming out against my staff and that kills me. You know, come at me all you want but leave my staff out of it."

Across interviews, election officials drew a clear distinction between pressure to change election outcomes versus pressure to signal partisan allegiance. **Officials reported that they were rarely, if ever, directly asked to break the law or manipulate votes.** This finding aligns with data from the 2024 Local Election Official Survey administered by the Elections & Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed College. The EVIC survey asked if election officials had experienced "pressure from officials in their jurisdiction to bend the rules or otherwise favor one side in an election" to which 89% answered "never."

Instead, LEOs described pressure to take public stands—such as criticizing voting systems or questioning certification processes—that would align them with partisan narratives. Interviewees also reported being pressured to stay silent when false claims were made, for example, in party meetings. In one state, LEOs reported pressure to defend controversial actions by their secretary of state.

Several officials emphasized that while public communication aligned with partisan interests would not change vote totals, it could seriously damage voter confidence. Most asserted the urgency of instilling voter confidence.

This commitment helps explain why many officials view ethical decision-making as distinct from legal compliance. Observed one former election official:

“The danger isn’t that the election result changes. The danger is that people stop believing any result.”

Influence of Different LEO Selection Structures on Partisan Pressure

ELECTED LEOS

Local election officials interviewed for this report who work in states where they must run for elections (Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and Washington) reported intense pressure from peers in their political party—such as party chairs, elected officials, and party activists. Several interviewees described being ostracized within their own party—or facing election primary challenges—after refusing to echo false claims of election fraud. The focus was on loyalty, with party leaders wanting to know the LEOs were “on their side.” Some described pressure to take public stands—such as criticizing voting systems or questioning certification processes—that would align them with partisan narratives.

One long-serving official from a small town explained that the party pressure often followed into everyday life, from grocery stores to community events.

APPOINTED LEOS

Partisan pressure appears to work differently where LEOs are appointed rather than elected, although that assessment is based on research only in Virginia. In that state, elections are administered in all of the state’s 133 localities by a combination of a three-person electoral board, nominated by the major parties, and a LEO (titled general registrar) who is appointed by the board. The registrars are not political appointees; they are hired for their professional qualifications to administer elections. Further, they are prohibited from partisan activities like serving as an [officer of a political party committee](#).¹

Interviews with registrars indicated that political pressure seems to be less common for them than it is for the partisan elected LEOs in the other states. A minority of registrars did report receiving pressure,

VA’s 2022 Election Board Shakeup

Virginia has 133 election jurisdictions, which include all 95 counties plus 38 cities. Each has a three-person local election board, with members nominated by their local Democratic and Republican parties. The party of the governor fills two seats; the other party fills the third. As a result, there are no third parties or independent members on any electoral board in the state.

In 2022, the party of the governor changed with the inauguration of Republican Glenn Youngkin, so all 133 boards changed membership to remove a Democrat and add a Republican. In some counties, the change in majority led to confrontations between general registrars and the boards. Problems included accusations by boards against registrars, removal of registrars, and a legal challenge by a registrar against a board member.

Two years later, two members of one board were removed by the Virginia State Board of Elections for refusing to certify presidential election results as required by law.

¹ NOTE: Virginia’s law is almost opposite of Michigan’s, where LEOs are *required* to serve on their county’s executive board. Each party’s county executive committee includes recent nominees for county and state legislative office, which includes county clerks. Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.599(1).

and in most cases the pressure was from members of their electoral board. Generally, the registrars appeared more insulated from partisan expectations, and less likely to report fear of party backlash. Several believed that being appointed (instead of elected) allowed their role to be understood by voters and party leaders as more administrative and less political. Virginia's registrars spoke more strongly against partisan acts like endorsing candidates, and more decisively about nonpartisanship generally, than did their peers in the other states.

When ERN's team interviewed electoral board members in Virginia, their experiences were different from the registrars. In some cases, they are on the receiving end of political pressure from their local party leaders. Some board members, for example, mentioned clear expectations from the party about replacing the general registrar or taking a certain vote on local election policy issues.

How LEOs Respond to Pressures

Many LEOs said they responded to partisan pressure by reinforcing their posture of impartiality and creating greater distance from their own political party. For some, that meant no longer attending party meetings. Others said they attended party meetings, but on an equal basis with both major parties and in the role of an information provider rather than as a partisan participant. Still others chose to register as independents.

"I decided it is not OK for me to be a member of a party because I don't want to be beholden [to that party]."

"I was a Democrat when I started in this field; now I'm an independent. Now a lot of us are moving away from politics. I believe I should represent all parties."

Despite the ethical motivation of changing to an independent status, the shift can jeopardize a LEO's ability to be elected, since many voters vote on party line. One highly experienced LEO, who runs as an independent in a Republican district, explained it this way:

"Any Republican could take my seat just by filing their candidacy from the sofa—with no experience—just because they have an R behind their name. It's sad that these positions could be determined by something like that."

This is a risk that some are willing to take. Commented one LEO, "The job isn't worth it for me to run as a party member. My ethics drive me to run as an independent." Others, however, feel they cannot take the risk. One official said that while "in her heart" she wished the LEO position were nonpartisan, she would not run as an independent "because the party would run someone

Unusual Rules in WA Enable Independents

In Washington, as in 24 other states, LEOs are selected through elections. But the state stands out because it has a large share of LEOs who are politically independent—13 of 39. Why? Two structural rules make a difference:

Top-Two Primaries: Washington uses a system that lists all candidates from all parties on the same primary ballot, from which two candidates advance to the general election, regardless of party affiliation. This system can increase the chances for independent candidates.

Home Rule: Washington also allows counties to adopt home rule charters, enabling different election rules. Seven home rule counties have opted to make their primaries nonpartisan. These counties combine the Top-Two primary with ballots that have no party labels for candidates.

against me if I did.” Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments:

“If I had my way, my office for sure would be nonpartisan because you’re running elections for all your constituents—Democrats and Republicans and Independents.”

“I used to believe strongly that it was OK to have these county positions be partisan because voters should be able to know if the candidates shared their beliefs. As time has gone by, I’ve come to understand how administrative these positions are, and the idea that you need to know their philosophical beliefs—I’ve gravitated away from that.”

There are several policy levers states or counties can enact that make it easier or harder for LEOs to unaffiliate with a major party. See the **Error! Reference source not found.** section for details. The importance of these policies is illustrated by Figure 4, which presents survey data showing that voters are far less likely to trust the impartiality of election officials who are backed by a political party.

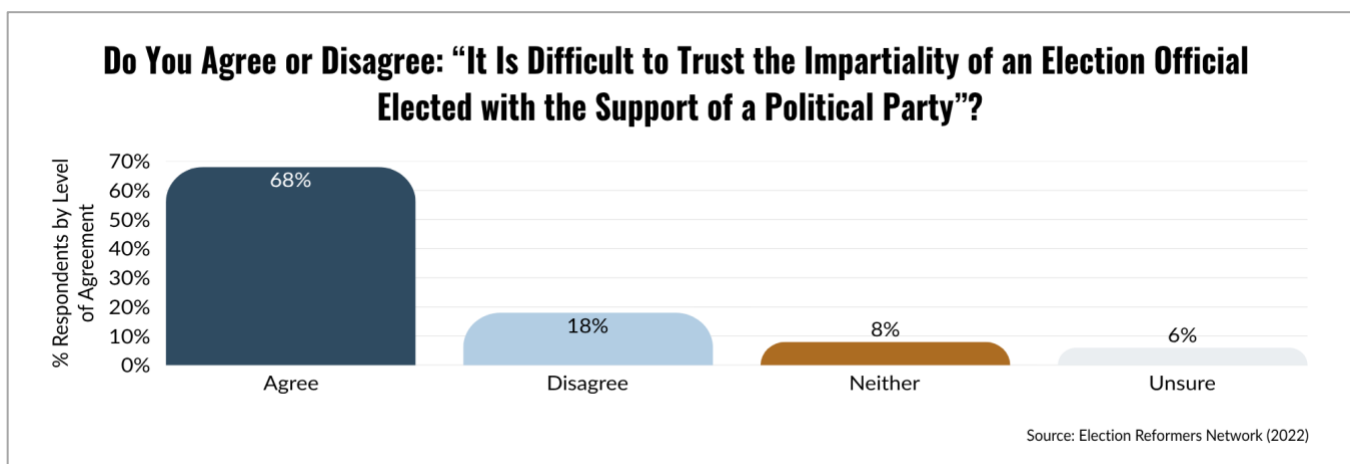


Figure 4: National Voter Opinion on Trust in Election Officials Elected with the Support of a Political Party

ENDORISING OR FUNDRAISING FOR OTHER CANDIDATES

Election officials are sometimes asked to participate in politics, for example by endorsing candidates or playing a role in fundraising. Even if done in a personal capacity, these actions can raise doubts about the neutrality of the election official.

Asked about these issues, many officials described a strong professional culture discouraging endorsements or fundraising, especially for candidates who appear on their own ballots. However, norms vary by state. For example, LEOs in Colorado and Florida said:

“For me, [endorsing] is a solid line that should not be crossed, I have never and no one should.”

“I’ve not seen anybody in my state endorse or fundraise for candidates... appearances really matter for trust. We have to be careful even about personal social media.”

"[Regarding how many clerks endorse or fundraise] Zero or close to zero... we send a very strong message discouraging this in clerks training."

"I do everything I can to prevent any appearance of impropriety: I don't go to fundraisers, and I don't write campaign checks."

When this question was posed to LEOs in Virginia—who are appointed instead of elected—the responses were even stronger, reflected below.

"I'm a living symbol of the system in my county. Making my viewpoints known can undermine people's trust in the process. Like preachers getting to live in a big house, election officials give up some things including being public about viewpoints."

"Even my husband doesn't share partisan info on social media."

"You have to be mindful that you are a public figure in the community. Have to be mindful that you are Switzerland."

"We have to be independent. Can't go flaunting political views. I don't vote in primaries. Even my family doesn't vote in primaries."

Some took it further: *not even voting*. Most Virginia LEOs interviewed abstain from party primary elections to avoid voters being able to know their party preferences. A few opted out of voting even in general elections.

However, there were a few exceptions.

- Most of the LEOs interviewed in Washington refused to endorse candidates, with the notable exception of the Secretary of State race since it is relevant to their expertise.
- At least two interviewees said they financially contributed or endorsed in races *not* on their ballot, and one of them only in races of other LEOs.
- Some clerks in Michigan, interviewed before this research project began, saw this issue very differently. They advised ERN staff that norms in their state allowed both endorsing and fundraising for candidates or causes they believed in. They felt it was fair to be transparent about their political identities and saw the actions as a right of free speech.

National [survey data](#) shows bipartisan majorities of voters believe election officials should not fundraise for other candidates in races they administer, or be allowed to oversee decisions affecting their own races. See Figure 5.

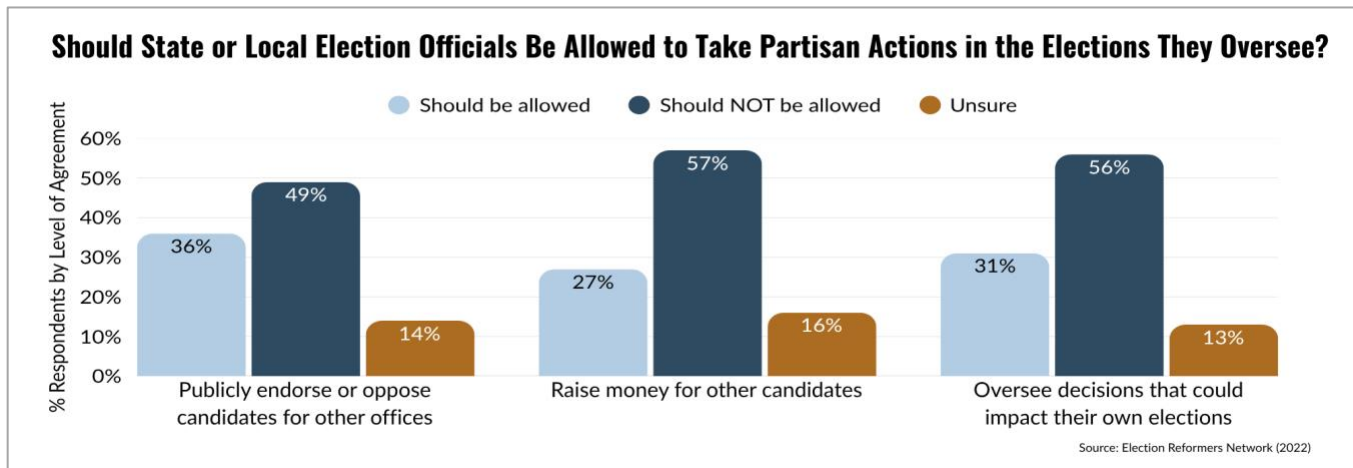


Figure 5: National Voter Opinion on Election Officials Endorsing or Fundraising

RECUSALS: INFORMAL AND FORMAL

One of the clearest ethical stress points consistently described was when LEOs themselves are on the ballot for re-election or higher office. Many commented that strong safeguards in election law prevent an official from doing anything to affect their own election, but even so, it's easy for the public to *perceive* a conflict of interest. For these reasons, many officials take voluntary steps to maintain public trust.

Levels of mitigation on this topic fall into three categories:

- **Informal, voluntary actions:** Choosing to avoid potential conflicts such as entering ballot counting rooms during election years.
- **Formalized actions:** Formally delegating ballot processing responsibilities to professional directors or deputies, and/or establishing formal policies restricting LEO presence in tabulation areas. (These solutions are generally limited to counties that have resources and capacity.)
- **Legal or policy reforms:** Converting LEO posts to being appointed (also requiring a change in law), or creating in advance public plans for when/if to recuse and how to avoid conflicts of interest. (In March 2026, Utah passed [a bill](#) to require conflict of interest mitigation.)

Notably, nearly all interviewees described taking at least some voluntary steps to address potential conflicts. However, these actions were largely self-directed, with officials devising their own procedures in the absence of formal guidance. More than one interviewee remarked that they wished their state association offered clearer guidance on “what to do when we are on the ballot.”

These voluntary actions were also almost universally undertaken quietly, without public announcement. This choice reveals an important tension: although the aim was to strengthen trust in elections, the steps taken to protect that trust were generally visible only to staff, not to the members of the public most inclined to doubt the legitimacy of election results.

Above all, the interviewed LEOs stressed that maintaining the public's trust requires both real and perceived neutrality:

“I voluntarily step back during that time [when on the ballot]. I don't go into the election space... even when unopposed.”

“If my name is on the ballot, I don’t touch them. It’s my voluntary decision... we make it work.”

“I haven’t been up for re-election yet, but [when I am] I will fully recuse myself... I don’t want people thinking I’m messing with the ballots.”

Some feared, however, that no amount of procedural mitigation would fully resolve perception concerns.

Different viewpoint: A minority of interviewed election officials did not see their own election as an issue because security procedures prevent interference. Commented one LEO, “There’s nothing I can do [to alter ballots]... We have strong security protocols... So, I’m not going to worry about perception much.”

DOUBLING DOWN ON PRACTICAL PROFESSIONALISM

Many officials spoke of their commitment to high standards and their pride in managing teams that operate with accuracy and efficiency in high-pressure environments.

“I’ve hired and kept the best people on my leadership team. They’re really good at their jobs, which allows me to take a step back and be future-focused... On how to be a better leader in this space.”

To that end, “continuous improvement” came up often: “We’re continually finding ways to make it better, micro-improvements, micro-efficiencies.” Another theme was deep understanding of and faithfulness to election law, which can serve as a kind of haven in the political storms.

In one state, multiple officials mentioned with pride the recount of a close statewide race as a good indicator of the accuracy and reliability of the election procedures in the state. “It was incredible that we came out perfect,” said one official about the recount. “Zero changes” from the election night result.

Many officials also spoke of extensive efforts to meet with voters and explain election procedures to address concerns and doubts. One official said it was his responsibility to “counter untruth. Every time.”

“I embarked on a personal mission to regain the confidence of the Republican party. No better way than to learn about the process. Many of them ended up serving in our observer program.”

“There’s a certain population that’s unreachable, so I pivoted to people with questions that suggest they are reachable. We trained and recruited election observers, and the more questions they had the more I pushed to make that person an insider, an official observer, ... an evangelist.”

It is noteworthy, and encouraging, that many interviewees responded to pressures by being even more dedicated to their jobs.

Worries About Politically Motivated Newcomers

A recurring concern expressed by veteran election officials—and some election board members as well—was the vulnerability of the profession to less principled newcomers, especially at a time when [turnover has increased](#) in the profession. While several interviewees emphasized that partisan pressure does not change their own conduct, many worried that sustained toxic politics in the country could attract individuals more willing to prioritize partisan outcomes over professional norms. Experienced officials raised concerns that individuals who might be motivated by conspiracy theories or grievances about the 2020 election would pursue

election administration posts. Officials were also concerned that a lack of training and guardrails could make newcomers to the field more vulnerable to believing and spreading false information and/or engaging in partisan manipulation. A few illustrative quotes on this topic:

“I have seen election officials reinforcing myths and spreading bad info in the party.”

“The parties will do and say anything to get their candidates elected and maintain power... All that comes into play on how to make things better.”

External Support for Local Election Officials

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS: THE FIELD’S FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

In most states, an important source of support to local election officials comes from the state professional association. Interviewees made it clear that associations are playing a very important role in these challenging times for election administration. Some of the value is functional: providing regulatory training, sharing information, responding to state legislation, etc. Interviewees also pointed to important cultural and norm-setting value from the associations. One official described the cultural impact this way:

“In this association we keep politics out of it, and we are the adults in the room. We try to maintain professionalism and integrity within our role in this process... People have really taken on the importance of our role and what it means to uphold this culture. We’re in total alignment on that, no one is fighting us on it, because of years of integrity and professionalism within our organization.”

Several LEOs likewise commented that “a strong association is very important” to building the norms and positive “peer pressure” that can make the election workforce less vulnerable to potential partisanship.

Local election officials recognized that, across a state, they are collectively bound by a shared professional reputation. That dynamic incentivizes them to help each other address problems and strengthen performance. As one official explained, “We know if one looks bad, the whole bunch looks bad.” Even at a time when the rest of the nation is so deeply politically divided that people of different parties even avoid speaking with one another, LEOs themselves are working together effectively, across party lines.

WANTED: MORE AND DIFFERENT ETHICS TRAINING

Although interviewees valued their professional associations, many also observed that those associations were under-resourced or more focused on procedural matters than on ethics. Across states and roles, LEOs

Association Responded to VA Crisis

As noted previously, political confrontations arose in Virginia after new majorities took control of local electoral boards in 2022. Leaders at the Virginia Electoral Board Association (VEBA) responded by focusing on ethics to try to address the problem.

Association leaders connected with [The Election Center](#) and the [American Law Institute](#) to get help establishing a new [Code of Ethics and a new Standard of Conduct](#). The Association also implemented scenario-based ethics trainings for election board members.

consistently expressed the view that ethics training is needed, that existing offerings are insufficient, and that escalating partisan pressures make stronger ethics guidance urgent.

There was clear support for more robust, scenario-based training, even though a few LEOs were skeptical. Many LEOs wanted training that addressed the kinds of real-world dilemmas they confront in practice: whether to respond publicly to misinformation, how to handle pressure from party leaders, or how to manage conflicts when they themselves appear on the ballot.

Most interviewees reported that they had received some form of ethics training. However, that training was widely described as compliance-based or oriented toward ethical questions that were less relevant to election administration. In Florida, for instance, LEOs complete the same ethics training required of other county officers, such as treasurers and sheriffs. As a result, the training tends to focus on issues like gift restrictions or misuse of public funds, rather than the political and ethical dilemmas that loom largest in election administration.

“[Current training is] 90% compliance. Not ethics in the way we are talking about it.”

“It’s really important, now more than ever... Ethics training can prepare people to deal with these [problems we’ve been talking about].”

“Real ethics training is done seldomly and should be done more... We are suffering from a deficit of training.”

“I’d love to see [ethics training] a statutory requirement nationally.”

Some highly experienced LEOs seemed to believe that they, personally, might not need ethics training—but that others do.

“There are people who are more susceptible to these kinds of pressures. If they’re isolated, they’re not hearing from anybody else. ... Ethics training can prepare people to deal with these scenarios.”

Among the seven professional election administration programs offered at colleges and universities in the United States, only two offer an explicit course in ethics. (See details in Appendix C.) Some interviewees had taken, and commended, the ethics course included in the Certified Elections Registration Administrator (CERA) program offered by The Election Center. The course, a 10-hour session on “Ethics in Election Administration and Voter Registration,” uses scenario-based exercises.

Drawing on learnings from this report’s interviews, ERN partnered with The Elections Group to pilot a [LEO ethics training](#) that deals with partisan pressure head-on. It was presented initially at the 2026 Colorado Clerks Association conference.

PRESSURE POINTS

Structural and Policy Challenges That Complicate the LEO Profession

The pressures and ethical challenges described in the preceding sections are not isolated incidents; in part they stem from the institutional structures of local election administration in the United States. The method by which local election officials (LEOs) are selected and the extent to which partisanship is embedded in election governance shape both the pressures LEOs face and the ethical dilemmas they must navigate. This section explores:

- International insights about the U.S. compared with other modern democracies
- LEO selection methods in America
- Examples from other professions regarding ethical preparation for tough choices

International Insights

Most nations provide a great deal of structural protection to their election officials from partisan influence. By contrast, the U.S. operates within a system that allows for far more party involvement in election administration. It is the only modern democracy that:

- Allows states to select election officials in partisan elections
- Allows election officials to oversee their own election
- Allows election officials to campaign for candidates running in elections they manage
- Allows party-nominated structures to oversee election management or certification
- Allows states and county election boards to be comprised only of party-nominated people

These structural features have become more consequential in this era of heightened ideological polarization. The rise of ideologically segmented social media, widespread misinformation about election processes and results, and increasingly apocalyptic political rhetoric have deepened public distrust. As voters come to view the opposing party not merely as mistaken but as illegitimate or dangerous, many LEOs are in an untenable position. On one hand, they must behave in a manner that engenders trust in their impartiality from voters in the opposite party, while at the same time demonstrating that they remain “on the team” of their own party to secure reelection or reappointment.

LEO Selection Methods

The method by which LEOs attain office significantly influences the degree and type of partisan pressure they encounter. As previously noted, some LEOs are elected, others appointed. Some processes are partisan; others are nonpartisan. The institutional design of local election administration does not merely organize responsibility; it structures incentives and channels political influence.

Selection rules for LEOs are complicated, [varying across states](#) and often even within states. The categories are sometimes not clear-cut. Figure 6, developed by ERN from state code, provides one breakdown of selection methods.

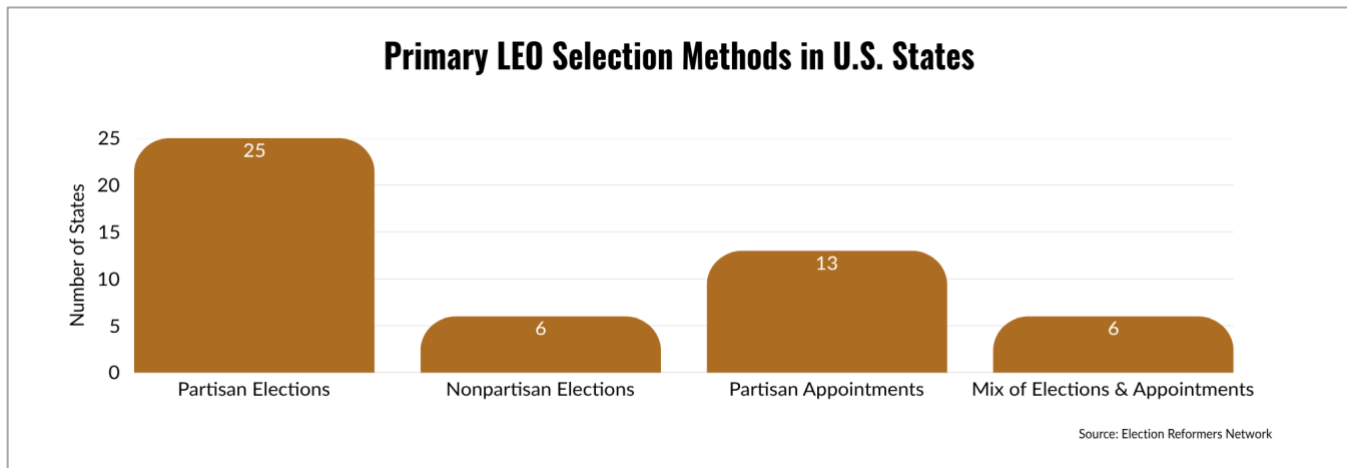


Figure 6: LEO Selection Methods by State (coded by the state's most common method)

Partisan approaches to LEO selection dominate in the U.S. Most states (38) use such methods, and five of the six states with mixed systems use partisan appointment or elections for at least some jurisdictions. [Similar research](#) finds that, in states with county-level election administration, about two-thirds of the population (65%) has partisan election administration.

States and counties sometimes change the selection method for their LEOs, and those transitions may be increasing. As previously noted, several Washington counties have changed their elections to nonpartisan through a home rule charter. In Montana, counties can choose who runs elections, and in recent years nine of the state's 56 counties moved election responsibility away from the elected clerk to a separate, appointed election director.

Florida provides an example of a change back to partisan elections. The State Supreme Court [ruled](#) in 2019 that counties that had previously implemented nonpartisan elections had violated the state constitution. In one county, the Election Supervisor, who had been elected six times as an independent, lost the position once the election changed to a partisan basis. Campaign spending on the supervisor race in that county quadrupled when the election shifted from nonpartisan to partisan.

ELECT, APPOINT, OR NO LABELS? WHAT SCHOLARSHIP INDICATES

Researchers have assessed the efficacy of appointed versus elected LEOs, as well as voter viewpoints on nonpartisan selection of election officials.

A [2025 study](#) by Joshua Ferrer provides one of the most comprehensive comparisons of elected and appointed LEOs. Drawing on a dataset of approximately 1,000 counties across 13 states that transitioned from one selection method to another, Ferrer finds consistent evidence that appointed officials outperform their elected counterparts on key measures. Ferrer further notes that appointments have grown more common over time, with more than 300 counties adopting this method since 1960.

Other research, conducted in 2024 by the MIT Election Data and Science Lab, found that a majority of voters favor a transition to nonpartisan election officials. Among 13 possible reforms polled, "only selecting election officials in a nonpartisan manner" generated the second-highest level of bipartisan agreement (i.e., the smallest partisan gap between Democrats and Republicans)—as well as a strong majority of support overall. See Table below for details.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ELECTION REFORMS, RANKED BY LEVEL OF BIPARTISAN AGREEMENT (2024)

	Difference between Democrats and Republicans	Total Support (%)
Paper backups	1-point spread	86%
Nonpartisan election officials	9-point spread	76%
Election Day holiday	14-point spread	77%
Cell phone voting	15-point spread	23%
Handcount all ballots	16-point spread	42%
Automatically change registration when moving	19-point spread	79%
Election Day on weekend	22-point spread	58%
Photo ID	23-point spread	85%
Internet voting	24-point spread	33%
Ranked choice voting	25-point spread	45%
All mail voting	27-point spread	28%
Same-day registration	33-point spread	58%
Automatic registration	36-point spread	64%



Source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab (2024)

Lessons from Judiciary and Accounting Professions

Judicial and accounting ethics systems offer a practical model for election administration because all three fields involve consequential discretion under public scrutiny. In contrast to purely aspirational guidance, judges typically operate under binding codes that are adopted and enforced through court rules (e.g., the ABA Model Code, and the federal Code of Conduct), and many jurisdictions provide formal ethics guidance through advisory opinions (e.g., state judicial ethics advisory committees and the U.S. Courts' published advisory opinions). Accountancy similarly embeds ethics into professional regulation through codes of conduct and continuing education expectations; many state boards require periodic ethics certifications (for example, Virginia requires an annual ethics course), alongside broader continuing education requirements.

A shared strength of both fields is scenario-based ethics learning: hypotheticals, case discussions, and role-play that help professionals practice judgment before facing real-world dilemmas. Research on professional ethics education consistently finds that interactive, case-based formats improve ethical sensitivity and decision-making compared with lecture-only approaches, including evidence from business and accounting ethics pedagogy and broader ethics-education studies.

Implication for LEOs: state and association training should lean heavily on election-specific scenarios (party pressure, conflicts of interest, public communication dilemmas), complemented by continuing education and a trusted advisory mechanism, such as an association ethics committee that can offer confidential guidance.

RECOMMENDATIONS**Building Ethical Support for Election Officials**

The following recommendations respond to the central findings of the report: LEOs face political pressure and gray-area ethical dilemmas, and many LEOs support changes to increase their protection from politics.

The list of recommendations begins with strengthening professional associations, which are often the most credible and scalable vehicle to expand capacity, build policy support, and create ethics infrastructure. The recommendations also address the most predictable and visible conflict points: endorsements and fundraising, potential conflicts when an election official is on the ballot, and institutional designs that embed partisan incentives in the first place. To these matters, the report’s approach is deliberately flexible, offering voluntary guidelines, formal policies, and statutory options because legal contexts vary widely by state.

These reforms treat impartiality as a systemic commitment that should be supported by rules, transparency, and professional infrastructure, not merely as a personal virtue.

Theme	Recommendation	Potential Actors
Strengthen election official associations.	1. Expand funding and capacity for state associations including support for professional staffing, consulting support, and technical assistance.	Foundations, state or local governments, association members
	2. Develop or strengthen policy committees and advocacy capability of associations to advance legislative needs of the election administration profession.	Associations, foundations
Expand ethics training and peer support.	3. Provide ethics training for LEOs and senior staff through multiple channels, designed to go beyond compliance and include: (a) real ethical dilemmas, (b) scenario planning for partisan pressure, and (c) confidential discussion formats.	Associations, training organizations, state elections offices, foundations
	4. Establish ethics committees within associations to inform ethics guidelines and provide peer-based support when election officials need advice.	Associations, former LEOs
	5. Make ethics guidelines or manuals publicly available (not behind members-only firewalls) to strengthen transparency and build voter trust.	Associations, training organizations
Mitigate conflicts of interest re: political activity.	6. Reduce or eliminate political fundraising and candidate endorsements by election officials—at minimum for races they oversee—using one or more levers: (a) voluntary guidelines, (b) formal published directives at state or local levels, and (c) state or local laws.	Associations, local or state election boards, lawmakers
	7. In circumstances where state or local election officials set their own voluntary policies on endorsement or fundraising, make such policies available to the public.	State or local election officials

Theme	Recommendation	Potential Actors
Mitigate conflicts of interest re: officials on the ballot.	8. Reduce conflicts of interest when election officials are candidates by adopting (a) voluntary recusal guidance, (b) formal policies, or (c) state/local laws (e.g., Utah's new law).	Associations, local or state election boards, lawmakers
	9. Explore the establishment of “recusal benches” of former LEOs who can step in to perform sensitive functions when an official recuses.	Associations, LEOs, state election offices
Depoliticize election official posts and election boards.	10. In states with partisan-elected LEOs, use available pathways (home rule charters, ordinances, state law) to transition LEO selection to nonpartisan election, or to appointment by election boards, or new appointment bodies.	Associations, research organizations, state or local lawmakers
	11. In states with partisan-elected secretaries of state, explore reforms that transition to a nonpartisan selection method or that reduce, partisan incentives. Increase the likelihood that impartial career professionals will take state chief election officer positions. (See information on secretary of state reform options .)	State lawmakers, research organizations
	12. Where relevant, pursue legislative options to make election boards less partisan, such as adding one or more board members who are not party-appointed (e.g., via nomination by other stakeholders or an application process).	State election boards, research organizations, associations, state lawmakers

Suggested Future Research

This report’s findings point to additional research opportunities for the election community:

- Qualitative research into ethical challenges facing LEOs in states other than the five studied in this report
- Further assessment of differences in political and ethical challenges facing appointed versus elected LEOs
- A 50-state index of state policies regarding political party involvement in election administration (which could be modeled on the [Elections Performance Index](#))
- Pros and cons of term limits for LEOs, given the rising turnover in the election administration workforce
- Assessment of the impact on LEOs of partisan positions taken by secretaries of state

Conclusion

The findings in this report illustrate a paradox at the heart of American election administration. The system embeds partisan selection processes at many levels while asking election officials to transcend partisanship in their daily work. This is not a new tension, and for decades most election officials overcame the conflict without major disruption. What *is* new is intense party animosity and hyper-polarization, which makes the old structural paradox harder to sustain.

Partisan pressures can place the workforce in ethically ambiguous situations where legality is not always the central question; legitimacy is. In such moments—and absent formal laws or guidance—the quiet acts of restraint displayed by LEOs are an underrecognized form of professional heroism.

But unseen restraint is not a durable governance strategy, especially amid turnover and the risk that new entrants may lack the same professional grounding or shared norms.

If the United States wishes to preserve confidence in elections, it must invest not only in machines, procedures, and security protocols, but also in the ethical infrastructure that supports the people who administer elections. Strengthening legal guardrails, expanding scenario-based ethics training, implementing firm conflict-of-interest rules, and reconsidering outdated laws that embed partisan incentives are needed—and they are needed now. These are not accusatory reforms; they are protective ones. They signal that impartial administration must become a systemic commitment supported by institutions, not merely an individual attribute that must withstand increasing pressure.

Ultimately, the goal is not to dramatize election administration, but to stabilize it. Turning down the political temperature surrounding these roles, insulating them from unnecessary partisan incentives, and building robust ethical support systems can help restore that equilibrium. America's local election officials have demonstrated remarkable dedication under extraordinary strain, and they are now asking for change.

Appendices

Appendix A: Election Administration Variables in the Target Research States

The table below summarizes the staffing hierarchy of election administration in the five states studied: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Washington, Virginia. This ERN analysis was compiled from multiple sources including each state's secretary of state website, Ballotpedia, and relevant sections of each state's election code.

	Arizona	Colorado	Florida	Washington	Virginia
State chief election officer	Adrian Fontes (D), Secretary of State, Elected in partisan elections	Jena Griswold (D), Secretary of State, Elected in partisan elections	Cord Byrd (R), Secretary of State, Appointed by governor	Steve Hobbs (D), Secretary of State, Elected in partisan elections	Commissioner of Elections, Appointed by 5-member, party-nominated state board
Local election jurisdictions	15 counties Population ranging from 4.6 million to 9,400 people	64 counties Population ranging from 750,000 to 700 people	67 counties Population ranging from 2.8 million to 7,900 people	39 counties Population ranging from 2.3 million to 2,000 people	133 localities (95 counties + 38 cities) Population ranging from 1.1 million to 3,4000 people
Local election leader title	County Recorder	County Clerk	Supervisor of Elections	County Auditor	General Registrar
Is the role elections only?	Elections only	Elections and other clerk functions	Elections only	Elections and other clerk functions	Elections only
Local leader selection	Partisan election	Partisan election (except Denver)	Partisan election	Partisan election (most counties)	Appointment by local election board
Breakdown by affiliation	73% R / 27% D	59% R / 31% D / 10% I	85% R / 15% D	51% R / 15% D / 33% I	NA
Local board?	County Board of Supervisors, Elected in partisan elections	No	No	No	3-member party-nominated boards, 2 members from governor's party

The table helps illustrate a key fact about American elections: there is substantial variation in administrative roles both across and within states. In some states, the local election leader is all about elections, in others they also manage a wide range of other functions, such as drivers' licenses, deeds and notaries. In some states election work is a shared responsibility between a Recorder or Register and a board at the county level. Each state's election jurisdictions vary tremendously in population, and for that reason the responsibilities and experience of managing elections also vary significantly from the smallest to the largest counties.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The following questions created the foundation for the election official interviews summarized in this report.

1. You are a public servant. You have a lot of responsibilities. Is being an election official your main job, or is it secondary to the other things? Rough percentage?
2. What's one great part of your job, and one lousy one?
3. You have to run for your seat. And you have to run the election in which you're running for your seat. To what extent are there ethical issues in striking that balance?
4. You may have received the annual LEO survey put out by Dr. Paul Gronke. Among its questions, the survey asks officials whether they've ever felt pressure from officials in their jurisdiction to bend the rules or otherwise favor one side in an election. Have you, or your LEO peers, experienced such situations?
 - a. [Interviewer offered a known example from their state.] What are your thoughts – either about that example or others – about how partisan pressures come into play for election officials?
5. Are clerks in your state very active in their political party at the county level?
 - a. What portion of clerks do you estimate endorse other candidates or help in fundraising for other candidates? What do you think of that practice?
6. A substantial percentage of people in your profession left the field after the 2020 election. Do you have ideas for how to make your field less vulnerable to potential partisanship from newer members of the profession?
7. Some people compare your roles to judges. Many go through rigorous ethics training, with mock scenarios, small group discussions, video vignettes, and ethics certifications. To what extent might training like that be helpful to your field? How might it compare with what types of training you already receive?
8. What else would help us understand the ethics challenges clerks face – or are perceived to face?

Appendix C: Election Administration Programs in Universities

Institution	Program	Credential Type	Ethics on Webpage?	Description
University of Minnesota, Humphrey School of Public Affairs	Certificate in Election Administration	Academic certificate	No	Course list emphasizes election administration, law, management/security; "ethics" not labeled in titles on the public overview
Auburn University	Graduate Certificate in Election Administration	Academic graduate certificate	No	Program description emphasizes election administration through public administration/policy; "ethics" not labeled as a required course
Georgia College & State University	Election Administration Certificate	Academic certificate	No	Certificate overview emphasizes legal / political / administrative issues; "ethics" not labeled on the main overview page
Northern Arizona University	Election Administration Certificate	Academic certificate	No	Graduate catalog / overview describes election administration training; "ethics" not highlighted as a named component in the public description
Oakland University	Election Administrator Certificate	Professional certification (non-degree)	No	Program overview lists operations, communications, security, leadership / resilience; "ethics" not labeled as a standalone course, but ethical considerations incorporated into voter registration and management course
The Ohio State University, John Glenn College of Public Affairs	Ohio Registered Election Official Certification	Professional certification (non-degree)	Yes	Explicit module / course: "Understanding Ohio's Sunshine and Ethics Laws."
Election Center + Auburn University (Institute for Election Administration Research & Practice)	Certified Elections / Registration Administrator (CERA)	Professional certification (non-degree)	Yes	Core Course #5: "Ethics in Election and Voter Registration Administration."