Rural Election Administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta

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ABSTRACT

Less than one-fifth of the voting-age population lives in rural areas, yet nearly two-thirds of elections occur in jurisdictions classified as rural by the U.S. government. This study examines election administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta, a unique rural region with distinct socioeconomic and geographic challenges. Through qualitative interviews with local election officials (LEOs) across 17 counties in six states, this research identifies key challenges—including communication barriers due to declining local media, difficulties in recruiting poll workers amid population decline, issues with vote-by-mail delivery, and challenges in maintaining bipartisan poll worker balance. Conversely, LEOs report opportunities such as enhanced voter access due to smaller populations, high local trust, and robust federal and state support—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings highlight the interplay of rurality and election administration, offering insights for LEOs, policymakers, and researchers.

Keywords: rural, election administration, Mississippi Delta, local election officials

Introduction[1]

As early as 2002, there was recognition of a potential urban-rural spectrum in how elections are administered in the United States. With that recognition, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was passed and created the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC). HAVA charged the EAC, among other tasks, to examine factors that may differentially have an impact on elections administration in urban and rural areas (Ramsberger and Van Trieste 2013). This charge was the genesis for some

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early scholarly work on that divide (Rachlin 2006; Gronke and Caudell-Feagan 2008) highlighting the variance in challenges local election officials (LEOs) face across the urban-rural continuum. That early work culminated in 2010 with the EAC staff convening a working group made up of rural and urban LEOs and scholars to focus on four primary areas: voter outreach, personnel, polling places, and technology.

Considering the possibility of an urban-rural divide, there has been limited scholarly research with respect to the broad topic of rural election administration since that time. Employing case studies, Creek and Karnes (2010) found significant variation in the implementation of HAVA between rural and urban jurisdictions. Much of the background literature for that study came from broader findings and expectations in the bureaucracy, federalism, and policy application literatures. This background is almost entirely unrelated to the substantive topic of election administration. Only recently has higher-quality data at the local jurisdiction level—e.g., the Election Administration and Voting Survey—created opportunities to examine this previously unexplored aspect of election administration. It should come as no surprise that much of the analysis of U.S. elections happens at the state level where data are much more easily analyzed but also aggregated such that broad conclusions on the impact of rurality are difficult to draw. Surveys such as the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE) provide uniquely rich state-level findings (see Stewart (2020) for an example) about the voter experience but are almost impossible to utilize when it comes to getting representative samples below the state level. However, this provides the prospect of employing the high-quality data that are available, creating additional datasets from coding, and developing additional context through qualitative methods.

When discussing elections and electoral outcomes, the focus is often on urban areas and large population centers. Yet, rural America is neither monolithic nor static. An increasingly small fraction of the population is employed in agriculture (Hart et al. 2005). Towns range from regional centers of several thousand to communities with single-digit populations, and proximity to urban cores varies dramatically. Some rural residents travel a few miles for services while others face trips of hundreds of miles. The 2013 EAC Urban-Rural Study documented this variation, identifying 293 jurisdictions that were completely rural yet adjacent to metropolitan areas and 449 that were

completely rural and nonadjacent. These distinctions in geography, economics, culture, and demography have major implications for policy and research on elections.

Over the past century, the nation has evolved from a largely rural, agrarian society to one dominated by urban population centers (Lichter and Johnson 2023). Still, nearly two-thirds of the nation's counties are rural, as is at least 75 percent of its landmass, underscoring the continued importance of rural populations and their resources.[2] As scholars have noted (Hart 1998), policy analysts who treat diverse rural locales as uniform—or who assume rural problems mirror urban ones—may fail to identify distinct election administration challenges and effective solutions. Only by attending to this variation can differences in outcomes both across rural areas and between rural and urban jurisdictions be discerned.

LEOs operate in unique surroundings that differ exponentially both across rural areas and between rural and urban areas. Indeed, LEOs who practice in smaller and more remote areas in the Mississippi River Delta govern in a system characterized by financially limited organizations; small, shrinking, and aging populations; lack of partisan diversity; lack of regular access to collegial support; somewhat limited access to advanced technologies; historical and systemic challenges; and relatively high fixed costs per delivered service. This potentially creates challenging circumstances for rural LEOs and residents. As a result, rural LEOs share a different set of concerns than their urban contemporaries. The authors recognize there are many commonalities between urban and rural election practitioners, but it is the plethora of substantive differences in challenges and opportunities that are highlighted here.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised previously unforeseeable questions related to participation in public events, especially those related to elections. In the period preceding the 2020 general election, election officials across the country were concerned that the pandemic could suppress voter participation or, alternatively, that crowded polling locations might facilitate viral transmission—resulting in increased cases, hospitalizations, and mortality. As a result, many states and jurisdictions modified their voting laws by adopting automatic voter registration, eliminating excuse requirements for

2 Some U.S. government estimates place the total rural landmass as high as 97 percent.

absentee voting, and expanding early voting periods. These reforms were intended to promote electoral participation while safeguarding public health but were often costly, politically contentious, or both. These modifications, along with other systemic differences listed earlier—e.g., lack of internet and media access, limited postal infrastructure, and lower election infrastructure—have the potential to have far-reaching impacts in the more-impoverished local jurisdictions in the Mississippi River Delta.

This paper provides evidence from a series of in-person interviews conducted in May 2023 with LEOs in the Lower Mississippi Delta region. Outside of a few metropolitan areas, the Delta is a particularly rural and underexamined area of the country when it comes to election administration. The region also offered significant analytical leverage because it spans six states with varying election codes and administrative structures, allowing observations on how similar rural conditions interact with different institutional arrangements. Interviews took place shortly after the 2022 midterm elections—the first post-pandemic federal election—allowing officials to reflect on both the unique challenges of the COVID-19 period and their experiences with returning to more normal operations. This timing allowed exploration of the impacts of this unique period in addition to the broader subjects related to rural election administration.

Three primary research questions are explored as part of a broader project on rural election administration. These questions drove the development of the research design and the discussion guide for the interviews referenced later.

1. How does rurality affect election administration?
2. What are the unique challenges of election administration in the Mississippi River Delta region?
3. What are the effects of COVID-19 on the experiences of local election officials in rural jurisdictions?

This paper proceeds in the following manner. first, “rural” is defined. Next, the research design and sampling frame within the lower Mississippi Delta region is explained. findings and the

themes that emerged are then presented. finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion of the research and suggests paths forward for this project.

Rural Election Administration

Defining Rural

It is notably challenging to define where an urban area ends and a rural one begins (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). Indeed, dictionary definitions typically define rural somewhat inexactly as anything related to the countryside and not the town. This, in its basic form, is the definition used by the U.S. Census Bureau. "Rural encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (U.S. Census Bureau 2024). Across the various agencies of the U.S. government, there are no less than 33 definitions of rural (Childs et al. 2022). Although most definitions include some measure of population, others include descriptions like geographic isolation, adjacency to metropolitan areas, commuting distances, and land use, among others (Nemerever and Rogers 2021). Simply put, there are many ways to capture the various elements of rurality.

The ways in which rural and urban areas differ are myriad, ranging from higher proportions of elderly people and children to lower population density with higher percentages of poor and less-educated residents. This is compounded by diseconomies of scale and longer travel distances, which translate to higher costs for engaging in electoral behaviors. Access to proximate electoral services has the potential to have far-reaching impact on electoral outcomes, especially when exacerbated by circumstances such as a global pandemic.

With respect to election administration, the unit of measurement for the urban-rural spectrum presents the most significant challenge as these can vary across states—e.g., counties in one state versus towns in another. The authors sidestep this issue of measurement since all the states included in this study administer elections at the county level. Using counties as the level of analysis also allowed for the employment of clearly defined scales for measuring rurality. To select counties in the Delta region that were sufficiently rural—i.e., low population density and/or not adjacent to large urban centers—the Rural-Urban Continuum (RUC) code measure from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) was used (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service 2025). This approach is consistent with recommendations from Nemerever and Rogers

(2021) who advocate for using USDA ERS codes at the county level for political science research. The RUC codes run from one, representing most urban, to nine representing most rural. The authors exclude all counties <3 and limit the inclusion of 3s and 4s to counties with large rural areas despite having modest county seats or that receive a higher score due to larger urban areas in a neighboring county.[3]

The Lower Mississippi Delta Region

The study's focus is the Lower Mississippi Delta, a region running from southern Illinois through the Deep South along the Mississippi River. All counties in the sampling frame fall within the service area of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), a federal-state partnership targeting persistent poverty in the region.[4] This region was selected for both substantive and practical reasons.

Substantively, the Delta offers significant analytical leverage. first, it is among the most economically disadvantaged regions in the country with poverty rates well above national averages and decades of population decline. These conditions intensify the resource constraints and workforce challenges that characterize rural election administration more broadly. Second, the region spans six states—Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee—each with distinct election codes, administrative structures, and state-local relationships. This variation allows for observation of how similar rural conditions interact with different institutional arrangements. Tennessee, for example, employs appointed professional election administrators who focus exclusively on elections while officials in the other states are elected clerks with dozens of additional duties ranging from vehicle registration to deed recording. Third, the region's counties vary considerably in their degree of rurality, ranging from micropolitan counties adjacent to regional centers like Memphis, Jackson (Mississippi), Jonesboro, and Paducah to remote counties with no incorporated municipality exceeding 2,500 residents.

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3 For more on the RUC code measure, see https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation.

4 The DRA includes 255 counties and takes a broad definition of the delta. See https://dra.gov/map-room/.

Practically, the region's accessibility from the authors' home institution allowed for in-person interviews across multiple states within reasonable travel constraints.

Research Design

The goals for this project were to learn in depth about the experience of election administrators in the Mississippi Delta region. This mostly ruled out conducting any type of large-scale quantitative analysis and extending the study's reach to other rural areas of the country. Although there is important variation within the rural counties visited, the study is limited by issues that may be unique to this region. There are also issues of convenience and participation. For example, the authors were unable to secure participation from any parishes in Louisiana despite including several in their broader sampling frame.

This study's methods are qualitative. Formal interviews were conducted with the LEOs in each jurisdiction using a structured discussion guide.[5] All interviews were conducted in person in May 2023. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were either recorded for transcript analysis or documented with extensive notes in the event the LEO was not comfortable with recording. The recordings and notes were then analyzed to identify the themes and trends discussed in the next section.

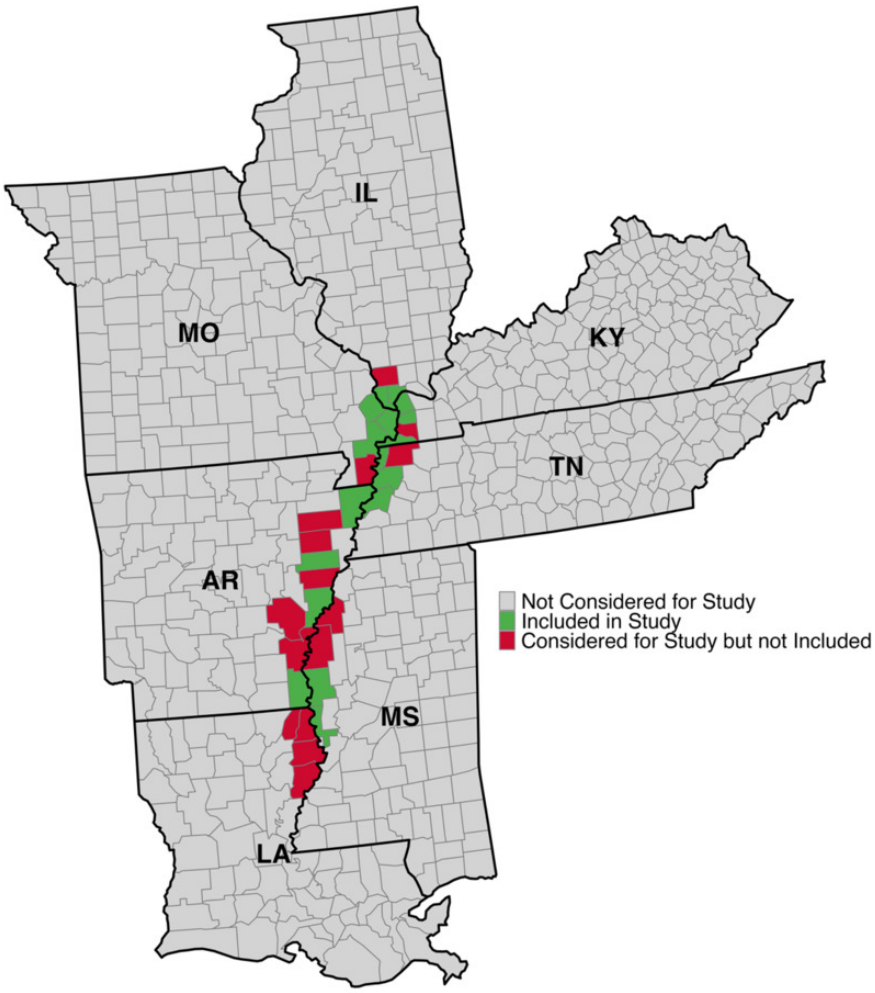
Sampling and Selection

The sampling process began by identifying reasonably reachable counties in the region that fit the study's definition of rural and by collecting contact information for the associated election officials. From there the authors invited the officials to participate in our study via email and phone. This yielded a sampling frame of 32 counties in seven states. From that frame, the researchers were successful in sampling 17 counties in six states. The counties included in the study are shown in figure 1.

Most of the interviewees were the chief election officials in their respective counties. The one exception was the inclusion of a chief deputy. There were significant distinctions in duties of the officials, especially across state lines. In Tennessee, for example, the election administrators work only in elections and report directly to their county boards of elections. In the other states, the titles varied—e.g., county clerk versus circuit clerk—but the responsibilities included a range of duties. These included

5 This design was approved by the Arkansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Figure 1. Counties Considered and Counties Included in Study



automobile registration, legal recordkeeping, tax collection, filing involuntary mental health commitments, deeds, and more. Officials in the sample were generally experienced administrators. Among elected officials, most were serving beyond their initial terms. Only two—one in Arkansas and one in Illinois—were in their first terms. The appointed administrators in Tennessee were all established in their roles. Although precise tenure data were not collected, the interviews reflected substantial institutional knowledge across the sample with most officials having administered multiple election cycles for their jurisdictions. This creates an extremely varied landscape when it comes to administrative capacity and

Table 1. LEO Duties and Demographics of Counties Included in Study

State	Administrator	Other Duties	County	Population	Change	Median Age	African American	Square Miles	RUC Code
AR	County Clerk	Bookkeeper, Recorder	Chicot	10,208	-13.5%	43.5	53.8%	691	9
AR			Mississippi	40,685	-12.5%	36.9	36.0%	920	4
AR			Phillips	16,568	-23.8%	40.8	62.6%	727	7
AR			St. Francis	23,090	-18.3%	39.3	52.5%	643	6
IL		Recorder, Taxes, Vital Records	Alexander	5,240	-36.4%	47.5	30.8%	253	3
IL			Pulaski	5,193	-15.7%	44.3	30.1%	203	8
KY		Automobiles, Recorder, Taxes	Ballard	7,728	-6.3%	44.7	3.8%	274	3
KY			Carlisle	4,826	-5.4%	42.3	1.9%	199	3
KY			Fulton	6,813	-4.4%	41.1	24.3%	231	9
MO		Budgets, Taxes, Recorder	Mississippi	12,577	-12.4%	40.4	22.6%	429	8
MO			New Madrid	16,434	-13.3%	42.1	16.2%	697	9
MO			Scott	38,059	-2.9%	39.6	12.3%	426	4
MS	Circuit Clerk	Court, Jurors, Licensing	Issaquena	1,338	-4.8%	37.6	65.3%	441	9
MS			Washington	44,922	-12.2%	38.5	73.0%	761	5
TN	Election Administrator	None	Dyer	36,801	-4.01%	39.3	15.1%	527	6
TN		None	Lake	7,005	-10.6%	40.2	26.9%	194	9
TN		None	Lauderdale	25,143	-9.6%	39.2	34.8%	508	6

elections in rural jurisdictions.[6] The counties in this study; their characteristics, including population in 2020; change since the last census (2010); median age; percent African-American; size; and their degree of rurality, as determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2025), are displayed in table 1.

Results

As noted in the introduction, there were several expectations regarding the administration of elections in rural jurisdictions. The study's findings are explained from the authors' interviews with local election officials through the lens of challenges and opportunities in the rural Mississippi River Delta region. Through these interviews several common themes were identified across most jurisdictions. Many were positive and counter to the experiences reported in the extant literature for more urban election offices. However, there were some exceptions to these positive trends, and they are unlikely to reverse anytime soon. There were four primary challenges and four primary opportunities consistently identified by the rural local election officials. These are presented in the next sections.

6 It is worth noting that, while the chief county official is uniform within states, larger counties can often afford to hire a dedicated elections official even when the chief official is an elected clerk.

Challenges

1. As noted in the 2013 U.S. Election Assistance Commission Urban-Rural Study final Report, difficulty in communicating with voters was consistently identified as one of the primary problems encountered by LEOs (Ramsberger and Van Trieste 2013). The more rural the area, the more acute the challenges became. Extreme rurality presents systemic challenges that their more urban counterparts are less likely to encounter in effectively communicating required information to the dispersed constituencies. The following quote from one LEO sums up well one of the many challenges of communication. “All our little-town newspapers have died, and it’s the law to run information. We must find another way to communicate information.” The Local News Initiative at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism produces the *State of Local News Report*, which has documented the acute decline of newspapers over time. As an example, between the prepandemic months of late 2019 and the end of May 2022 more than 360 newspapers closed (Abernathy et al. 2022). Since 2005, the country has lost more than 40 percent of its newspapers (Metzger and Franklin 2025). Furthermore, most of the communities that have lost newspapers do not get a print or digital replacement. It is estimated about 7 percent of the nation’s counties, or 213, now have no local newspaper (Metzger and Franklin 2025). Recent research (Jennings and Rubado 2019) shows voter participation declines in communities without a strong print or digital news organization, further exacerbating other challenges for rural LEOs. This—along with the lack of radio station coverage, intermittent to no consistent internet service, and lack of other print media sources—severely hinders all but word-of-mouth communication of most basic information and leaves many LEOs out of compliance with mandates related to the posting and dissemination of election information.

2. The second major challenge, but one that is not necessarily unique to rural jurisdictions, is the difficulty in recruiting and retaining election workers. This phenomenon has been well documented in the 2013 Urban-Rural Study final Report mentioned earlier and subsequently included in the EAC's EAVS 2022 Comprehensive Report (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2023). However, this problem has one unique rural aspect, a shrinking population due to lack of economic and educational opportunities. The average population loss for the 17 counties included in this study over last decennial census was 12.1 percent. With a shrinking pool of eligible workers, rural LEOs often have trouble meeting, or are forced to ignore, state requirements regarding minimum standards for election administration in terms of required poll workers. The second part of that equation is an aging population with a few LEOs mentioning that some of their more-reliable elderly workers were unable or unwilling to work during the pandemic. As one official commented, "It's getting harder and harder to find [election workers], and the stakes keep getting higher and higher." Again, this is not surprising given the ongoing work of Burden and Stein (2023).[7]

3. While not widespread, the third challenge is related to vote-by-mail and is troubling and could become more extensive. There is broad recognition that mail voting was an important method to cast a ballot during the 2020 presidential election because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, scholars had taken an interest in alternative voting procedures (Burden et al. 2014; 2017; Ritter and Tolbert 2020). While expanding mail voting was new for several jurisdictions and served as a response to anticipated challenges with in-person voting, an additional issue emerged that likely affects rural areas differently than their urban and suburban counterparts. Several LEOs encountered

7 Burden's and Stein's work in this area can be found at https://electionlab.mit.edu/articles/opting-out-recent-challenges-recruiting-and-retaining-poll-workers.

issues with the U.S. Postal Service being slow to accommodate vote-by-mail ballots that must arrive by election day. With many rural jurisdictions relying on urban mail centers often located two hours or more away by ground transportation, there are ballots that are not being counted because they arrive late. Given recent consolidations in mail service, this issue could become more problematic in rural jurisdictions in the future.

4. The fourth and final challenge identified by LEOs was the issues created by shifting party and demographic dynamics. This trend was first reported in the 2013 Urban-Rural Study final Report where 45 percent of LEOs responded that the requirement for having equal numbers of poll workers from each political party was either a moderate or big problem in poll worker recruiting. With the increasing number of local jurisdictions with voters increasingly identifying primarily with one party, Republican, it is more difficult for LEOs to meet the requirement for utilizing bipartisan election judges. Some are already in violation of that statute. A cursory review of state statutes reveals that many states require a partisan balance of poll workers with those restrictions varying greatly.[8] Given the federal approach to elections in the United States, these requirements are implemented and enforced at the local level but are particularly problematic in rural communities as what is left of a shrinking younger cohort of voters is also choosing not to register with a party. As that group grows, there will be even fewer potential candidates to balance polling places. This is a trend that has begun and is accelerating with no clear solution in sight under current election law.

8 For example, Iowa Code § 49.12 does not allow more than half of the poll workers in a precinct to be registered with the same party. New Mexico Statute §1-2-12 restricts the ratio to two-thirds from the same party. Massachusetts General Laws chapter 54, §13 states two-thirds of poll workers must be equally split between the two major political parties.

In sum, the challenges identified by Mississippi River Delta LEOs reflect structural realities of rural election administration. Declining local media, population loss, geographic distance from postal distribution centers, and increasing partisan homogeneity all stem from broader rural demographic and economic trends rather than administrative failures. While these challenges are not unique to the Delta, the region's acute population decline—averaging 12.1 percent across the sample of counties over the 2010-2020 period—intensifies workforce and communication difficulties. Notably, with the exception of recruiting elderly poll workers during the height of the pandemic, LEOs reported that COVID-19 did not meaningfully exacerbate these challenges. The obstacles they face are chronic rather than acute, rooted in long-term rural decline rather than emergency conditions.

Opportunities

While rural LEOs face many challenges, they are largely positive in their outlook about their jobs and the election landscape in general. LEOs identified several opportunities they are privileged to have.

1. The introduction outlines the plethora of challenges that rurality presents, from socioeconomic challenges to longer travel distances to polling places, all resulting in higher costs incurred to engage in electoral behaviors. Theoretically, all these issues should increase the cost of voting and lead to higher rates of vote abstention (Li et al. 2018). Yet, the rural LEOs were uniformly committed to access and were prideful in how they feel rurality translates into a smaller and more resourceful workforce equipped to provide more and easier access for voters in addition to allowing for more responsiveness to individual voters. They often mentioned the ease of registering and voting in their localities with particular emphasis in how they often know all the voters. Furthermore, they indicated the lack of population density translates into shorter waiting times to vote, ease of parking with no traffic concerns, and a host of other advantages.

2. There are several extant studies that have documented an increasing attrition trend among election officials (Edlin and Norden 2023; Gordon

et al. 2024; Ramachandran 2022; Waldman 2022). A cursory view of national election coverage of election officials reveals reports of increasing hostility and even threats of violence toward election officials. However, the environment for LEOs in rural jurisdictions seem to defy this trend. There was broad consensus that negative national discourse had no discernible impact on them and their counterparts in the Delta region in terms of administering elections. The general perception tended to be that local voters often had things to say about elections elsewhere, but these same voters trusted their own LEOs. One official put it this way, "[The voters] trust their county and nobody else's." The center-periphery relationship appears to be beneficial to rural areas in this instance, and the LEOs felt they were afforded a level of trust that often did not exist for their more urban counterparts, often even in their own states. Further, the LEOs did not experience any issues related to compliance with pandemic safety protocols from the voting public.

3. It is a widely accepted tenet of democracy that system stability is dependent upon acceptance of electoral outcomes as legitimate (Anderson et al. 2005). These LEOs believe that they had the confidence of voters in their jurisdictions that elections were open and fair. With respect to both accepting election outcomes and maintaining the confidence of their voters, most LEOs in our study had not experienced any official accusations of unfair practices, and none had received any threatening or menacing communication nor had their staffs. It appears that rural jurisdictions have been spared some of these more-alarming concerns expressed by their urban counterparts. This fits well with scholarly research that finds personal experiences have the potential to affect confidence in elections (Alvarez et al. 2021; Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Claassen et al. 2013; Kerr 2013; 2018).

4. LEOs in the Delta region were extremely positive in expressing their gratitude for federal and state funding and the positive impact it had brought to

their jurisdictions. This was expressed mostly in terms of assistance in funding new and improved voting equipment. Also, LEOs were highly complimentary of local, state, and federal officials for their advocacy in providing an overabundance of protective supplies and assistance during the pandemic. Every LEO interviewed had a very positive experience in terms of how the pandemic voting process was managed—whether it was with protective equipment, new policies, or expanding access through policies like extended operating hours or allowing vote by mail. By and large, with the one exception mentioned earlier concerning poll worker recruitment, the perspective of the LEOs in this study was that the COVID-19 pandemic had no discernible impact on the conduct of elections in the rural Mississippi River Delta region. Whether that is a byproduct of rurality, lower population density, or other factors is not immediately apparent from the qualitative interviews that were conducted. All six states were judged by the LEOs interviewed in this study as highly supportive with supplies and materials during the pandemic. Much of this can be attributed to HAVA's passage in 2002 that established the EAC and has been instrumental in providing needing funding and technology. Since 2003, over $4.2 billion in HAVA funds have been distributed.[9] During the 2020 federal election cycle, the EAC also distributed $400 million in grant funds provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to help states prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The qualitative interviews reveal a unique environment where rural LEOs share some of same challenges and opportunities as their urban counterparts but also diverge significantly in some of their experiences. Even inside their rural ranks, the experiences of the LEOs are not uniform, whether it be their state's design of the election bureaucracy or the partisan

9 See more about the EAC at www.eac.gov/about-the-useac.

makeup of the electorate. While their jobs are not static, many of the challenges faced by LEOs are, at best, fixed and, at worst, likely to accelerate in the future. As populations decline, tax bases shrink and the populace ages as younger generations migrate. Rural LEOs face headwinds that will present constant and emerging challenges requiring ever more inventive and potentially increasingly expensive solutions.

This study is not without limitations. first, it took place in a unique area of the country at a unique time. Although the authors hesitate to theorize strong differences between this study's rural area and those elsewhere, differences cannot immediately be ruled out without further analysis. The post-pandemic period was just beginning when these interviews were conducted, and the most recent election at that time—2022—was still very much impacted by pandemic procedures, emergency funds, and temporary policies. Thus, the most important limitation is generalization. On the other hand, this study's in-depth analysis of this unique time and place presents a deviation from much of the ongoing work in election science. This can be considered a strength of the study.

Future iterations of this project should involve both further in-depth exploration of other rural areas of the country and analyses of quantitative data to further explore the impact of rurality on election administration. State policymakers should continue to explore more avenues to support local election offices and should consider avenues for bolstering communication, technology, and workforce infrastructure in rural areas like the Mississippi Delta.

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Appendix

RURAL ELECTIONS PROJECT – INTERVIEWS WITH RURAL ELECTION OFFICIALS

MODERATOR DISCUSSION GUIDE

Research Objective: Conduct IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS with election official in rural jurisdictions to better understand their experience.

NOTE TO REVIEWER: Question probes are italicized below each main question and may change or be invalidated based on participants' responses. These are suggestions for the interviewer to follow and will be used as deemed relevant and necessary in the natural flow of discussion. The discussion guide is developed for a 90-minute session. As necessary, if /me constraints are present, the discussion guide will be adapted for 60-minute sessions. The order of ac/vi/es in the discussion guide may be altered in the case of a 60-minute interview. Moderator instructions are highlighted in yellow.

INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEW (5 MIN.)

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. My name is [Moderator name], and I'll be conducting this interview. In-depth interviews are a type of research used to gather opinions on a specific topic. We are going to discuss election administration in rural jurisdictions, a topic for which you have expertise.

Before we get started, I want to say a few things:

- You were selected because we are specifically interested in the experience of election officials in rural jurisdictions near the Mississippi Delta Region.
- I do not represent any government, political, or policy perspective. This means I am not looking for any particular responses, and you are perfectly free to be honest. Your responses won't affect me either way.
- There are no wrong answers. Our whole purpose for being here is to hear what you think, so please feel free to speak freely and openly. You may represent what a lot of other rural elections officials think.

- Everything we talk about here is confidential. That means your individual responses will not be reported and your name will not be associated with anything you say in our reports.
- You've probably noticed there are a couple of extra people in the room. They are here to observe and take notes—that way I don't have to worry about writing everything down. Also, we would like to audio record the interview but that's just so we can go back and make sure we captured all your thoughts correctly. If you uncomfortable with being audio taped, we will not record the session. Any objections?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

INTRODUCTION (5 MIN.)

Well now that we got that out of the way, let's jump right in. I already mentioned that I am going to ask about your experiences as an election administrator in a rural jurisdiction. To get started, I have a more general question.

- *What is one thing about being an election administrator in a rural jurisdiction that you wished everyone knew?*

THE RURAL ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE (50 MIN.)

[Complete as many of the following questions as time allows, follow up as needed]

Now we are going to talk specifically about your experience as an election official in rural jurisdictions. Let's start by discussing how you came to be in this role.

- *What was your path to becoming an election official in your county/parish?*
- *How long have your served in your role?*
- *Is there a standardized transition process when one official leaves your office and another takes over?*

Now that we know more about how each of you started in your role, let's talk a bit more about what else you do besides elections.

- *What are your primary duties for your current position?*
    - *What percent of the time would you say you spend on elections in a regular (non-election) year?*
        - *What about an election year?*

Let's also take a minute to discuss the people you work with on elections.

- *How many people are employed by your jurisdiction working specifically on elections, even if they have other duties?*
- *About how many volunteers working on elections would you say you have in your jurisdiction?*

Now that we have learned about the people in your office let's talk about funding.

- *About how much does your office spend on election administration during a regular (non-election) year?*
    - *What about during an election year?*
    - *Do you have a separate budget for elections?* [If unclear, make sure they understand we are asking if it is a budget item or something they just have to manage as part of a general budget.]
- *Do you think your elections-related funding is adequate?*
    - *Has it increased or decreased over time?*
    - *Has anyone in your state or jurisdiction called for a reduction in your funding?*
        - *Do they give reasons for this?*

Now let's talk about the voters in your jurisdiction.

- *How would you say the public perceives your office and the quality of elections in your jurisdiction?*
    - *Has that perception changed over time?*
- *Do voters in your jurisdiction have distinct experiences from those in more urban areas?*

Let's briefly talk about how elections work in your state.

- *What percent of election-related policies and procedures would you say are determined at the state level?*
- *Do you have autonomy on any of these?* [Probe what type if so.]
- *Do state elected officials (such as the governor, secretary of state, or state legislators) ever interfere or threaten to interfere in your administration of elections?* [Probe how if so.]

Before moving to the next section, let's talk a bit more about how being in a rural area affects elections in your jurisdiction.

- *What would you say is the biggest challenge facing rural election officials?*
    - *What about election officials in general?*
    - *Are there issues that you face that your urban counterparts do not?*
    - *Are there any parts of federal legislation related (e.g., HAVA) to election administration that you feel either neglects or affects rural jurisdictions negatively?*
    - *Do any of these help rural jurisdictions better conduct elections?*

PANDEMIC ELECTIONS (15 MIN.)

Now we are going to discuss your experiences conducting elections in 2020 and 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, there are no right or wrong answers, and our goal is complete honesty.

- *What was most different about conducting an election during the pandemic?*
    - *What was your own biggest concern?*
- *What, if anything, did your jurisdiction receive from the CARES Act and how was it spent?*
- *Did you feel you had adequate support and supplies for the pandemic elections(s)?*
- *Are there any specific reforms you would like to see that relate to running elections during a pandemic?*
    - *Conversely, are there reforms put in place during the pandemic that you would like to see end?*
- *Now that the pandemic is being declared over at the federal level, how do you think that will impact the conduct of elections in your jurisdiction going forward?*

CURRENT ELECTIONS CLIMATE (15 MIN.)

Recent elections have brought about significant political discourse with respect to election integrity and fairness. Let's spend some of our remaining time on that and how any of this current climate has affected your ability to run elections in your jurisdiction.

- *Does the national discourse surrounding election integrity affect elections in your jurisdiction?* [Probe for how.]
- *How do recent elections compare to previous elections you've run?*
- *Have you personally received any threats (physical or otherwise) during the previous two election years?*
    - *What about any of your staff or volunteers?* [Probe for nature of the threats as applicable.]

- *Are there specific reforms that you think should be implemented as a result of the current climate?*

CLOSING (10 MIN.)

We are nearing the end of our time together. Before we wrap up, I just wanted to ask if there was anything about conducting elections in rural areas that we did not discuss that you would like to share.

- *Is there anything else about conducting elections in rural areas that you would like to share?*

Thank you very much for participating in this interview I have enjoyed getting to know you and appreciate your time. This discussion has been extremely interesting. If you have any questions or want any additional information, please don't hesitate to come see me or one of the study staff before you leave.

Response to “Rural Election Administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta”

Rodney W. Allen[1a]

[1] *York County, South Carolina*

I have served in county election administration in South Carolina for almost 22 years, serving in Colleton, Pickens, Greenville, and now in York County. Pickens and Colleton are rural counties while Greenville and York are urban counties. The authors conclude the article by saying their study “took place in a unique area of the country and at a unique time.” While I do not dispute the Mississippi Delta being a unique place and the study taking place at a unique time—just two years after the COVID-19 pandemic—the authors’ findings of both challenges and opportunities in rural counties do largely resonate with my own experiences here in South Carolina with a few exceptions.

The first challenge the authors describe for local election officials (LEOs) of rural counties is communicating with voters due to lack of availability of local newspapers. Local newspapers are, indeed, disappearing. This certainly complicates matters for LEOs who may be required by law to run election notices in newspapers of general circulation. That said, there are ample other communication tools available to LEOs that can be used to communicate effectively with rural voters such as websites, social media posts, direct texting/emailing, and postal mailings. Laws requiring legal advertisements in newspapers would need to be amended to allow for these alternative means of communication if they do not already authorize them.

The second challenge raised by the authors states that recruiting and retaining election workers is an ever-daunting task that seems to have become more difficult for many election officials since the pandemic. In the article, the authors say rural counties face “a shrinking population due to lack of economic and educational opportunities” and that recruiting election workers is even harder because the pool to pull from is decreasing. While neither of the two rural counties in which I have served faced population decline, I am certainly aware of

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a Rodney W. Allen is the deputy director/election information security officer for the Board of Voter Registration and Elections of York County.

places in South Carolina where this has occurred and is a very serious issue for LEOs. Future studies should be conducted to gauge the feasibility of a more-compulsory form of election worker service similar to that of jury duty. Studies should also gauge public interest of participating if the pay of voluntary election workers is increased. Ultimately, for elections to happen LEOs require a certain number of election workers.

The third challenge the authors list concerns delivery of absentee-by-mail ballots and inefficiencies in the U.S. Postal Service. Slow delivery could conceivably result in ballots being delivered after election day even if they were mailed in sufficient time to arrive by election day. While mail is a bit slower now than in the past, it has been the experience of LEOs in South Carolina that the U.S. Postal Service does its absolute best to expedite ballot delivery as long as ballot envelopes have the "official election mail" logo. This applies when mailing ballots to the voters and when voters mail the ballots back. We have had postal officials make a special trip over to our offices on election days to deliver ballots they received even though mail had already been delivered for the day. I would argue this issue merits further study as it is likely largely dependent on the local and regional management of the U.S. Postal Service.

The fourth challenge the authors describe is the effects of uneven party membership on recruiting sufficient workers from both major political parties. In South Carolina, we do not register voters or hire election workers based on political party affiliation. All election office employees and election workers are nonpartisan. As a result, I am unable to comment from firsthand experience on this matter. However, I can certainly understand the dilemma faced when the law requires a certain ratio of party affiliation in the workforce, but the recruits who volunteer overrepresent one political party. As referenced earlier, a more-compulsory jury-selection style may need to be evaluated for election workers using the party designation on voter registration records.

The authors also described four positives for rural counties. Only one stood out to me, the lack of attrition of the rural LEO. Since the authors' study focused on one unique region, it could certainly be just a regional trait. I know in South Carolina, of the 46 county election directors who served during the 2020 general election, only 14 remain in an election director role. Sixty-eight percent of the counties have a new election director.

South Carolina is a largely rural state with only a few truly urban areas. I would largely agree with the authors' other findings in regard to positives for rural counties.

Overall, I think the authors' work is intriguing and merits further research using a more-representative and regionally diverse sample of rural counties. This would eliminate the possibility that findings are tied to a specific region and/or a potentially unique population that do not accurately represent rural counties in the U.S. in general.

Response to “Rural Election Administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta”

Uri Peters[1a]

[1] *U.S. Virgin Islands*

As an elections administrator working in the U.S. Virgin Islands, my experience is relatable with the challenges found in rural areas across the United States. The authors point out how there are structural, demographic, and logistical constraints that shape election administration in rural areas.

The discussion of communication challenges caused by the decline of local newspapers and limited broadband access reflects a persistent obstacle in rural election administration. My district of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John often experience delays in the election process because travel by ferry between islands can be time consuming as can the occasional impact of adverse weather conditions. In addition, the smaller and less-developed island of St. John is commonly affected by poor internet service, resulting in communication challenges. As a rural jurisdiction, it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain poll workers for reasons such as an aging population and many people opting to relocate to urban areas.

One of the most valuable contributions of the study is its discussion of trust. As a practitioner, I recognize the importance of trust between voters and local election officials. While national narratives often emphasize hostility and skepticism toward election administration, my experience aligns with the article’s findings that rural voters frequently place a high level of confidence in their local officials. This insight is important for policymakers and researchers as it highlights that election integrity is often reinforced through personal relationships and community familiarity, not solely through top-down reforms.

The authors were transparent about the qualitative nature of the study and the geographic focus on the Lower Mississippi Delta. They also acknowledge the limits of generalization, which is appropriate and responsible. While the sample is small, the

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a Uri Peters is an elections assistant for the Election System of the Virgin Islands.

themes identified are consistent with challenges I observe in my own professional environment, making the findings credible and applicable with reasonable caution.

From my perspective as a practitioner, one area that could have been explored further is the long-term sustainability of election administration in rural jurisdictions now that temporary federal funding has expired. While pandemic-related support is discussed thoroughly, rural election offices continue to face chronic underfunding, increasing compliance demands, and rising costs. Additionally, more attention to regional collaboration, shared services, and cross-jurisdictional support networks could provide practical insights for officials seeking scalable solutions. Overall, the results and recommendations of the article are both plausible and likely to be utilized in real-world settings. The study reflects the realities of election administration as it is practiced, rather than as it is often assumed to function, making it a meaningful and practical contribution to the field.