



ARKANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

*Department of*  
Political Science

# Exploring Rural Election Administration

## With Special Attention to the Mississippi River Delta

### Abstract

Election administration in rural areas is generally understudied in election science. Our explores rural election administration by employing three distinct phases. Perhaps uniquely, we undertook a qualitative study of rural election administration among local jurisdictions in six states of the Mississippi River Delta region. By engaging election officials in this area we provide heretofore unexplored depth and context—especially in light of the pandemic—to rural election administration in this region and beyond. We also completed a coding effort of election jurisdictions in forty-six states. Finally, we conducted analyses of election administration outcomes using several measures of rurality.

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Technical Report for:  
MEDSL Learning from Elections Project

**March 15, 2024**

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### Accomplishments

The goals of this project centered around answering our research questions:

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

To accomplish answering these questions we undertook several distinct research efforts.

### Website Coding Project

The first phase of our project involved hiring our undergraduate students to undertake the website coding effort. The process for this was to begin with Arkansas and generating randomized assignment of counties to the entire project team. From there we developed a coding template that included the following categories after collecting URL information for each jurisdiction: *Election Results, Early Voting Information, Absentee/Mail Voting Information, Overseas Voting Information, Military Voting Information, Address Change Information, Poll Worker Application, Candidate Information, Election Schedule, Felon Voting Rights Information, Sample Ballot, Track Vote By Mail, Polling Place Locations, Precinct Lookup, Voter ID Requirements (where applicable), Voter Registration, Voter Registration Cancellation, Voter Registration Status, and Signature Cure Form (where applicable)*. At the time of the projects end, all but three states are completely coded for all jurisdictions.

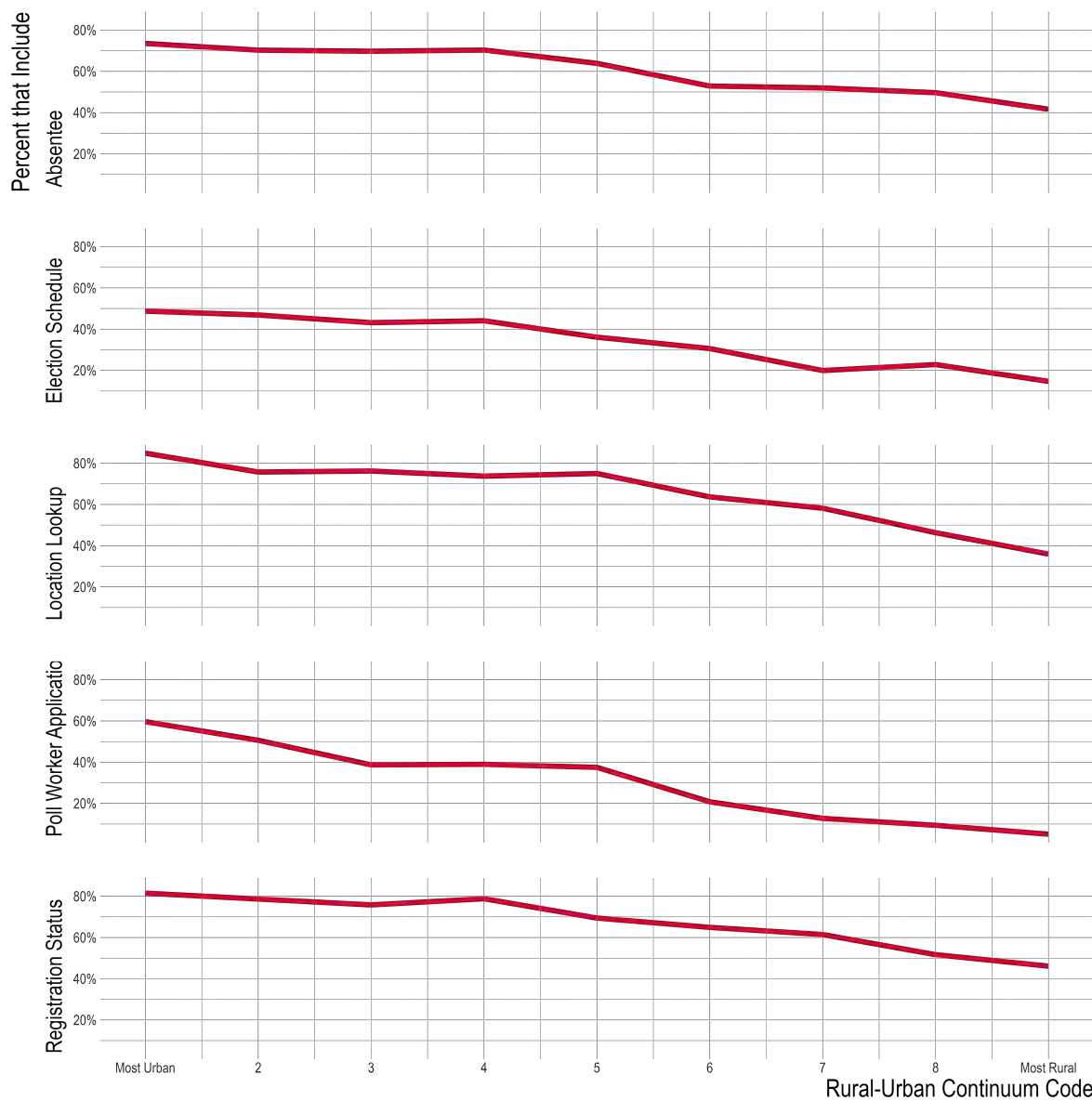
There are numerous ways to use these coded data. To illustrate some initial findings based on the forty-six states we have completed, in [Figure 1](#) we show the variation of item availability for several important measures across the range of rurality as measured by the USDA.<sup>1</sup>

It becomes quite clear that as jurisdictions become more rural they offer less online tools. Developing a more nuanced causal story is a priority for future iterations of this project, but we posit most of this boils down to some combination of funding, infrastructure, and staffing. Our qualitative experience (see below) indicated that rural jurisdictions are faced with significant challenges in the IT realm. This is driven by the fact that small counties have less infrastructure in this area at all, and many of them end up using outside contractors to manage the entire IT system for the county government and services. This means the elections office, for example, is only a small part of an overall system that is already understaffed and undersupplied. There are other potential explanations (e.g., education levels among staff, potentially age), but we need additional data to explore those.

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<sup>1</sup>To learn more about this measure visit here: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/>.

**Figure 1:** Variation in Online Tools Across One Dimension of Rurality

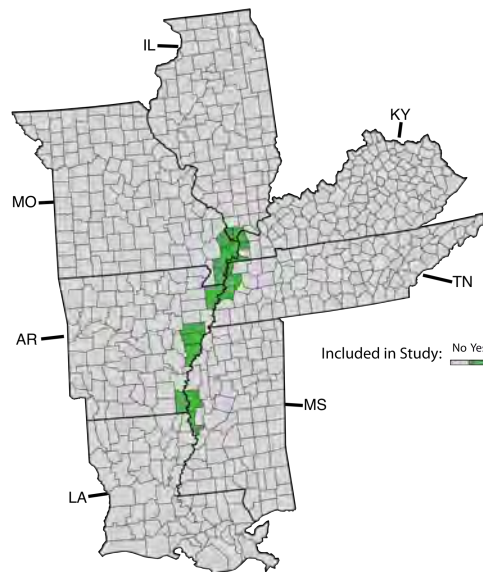


*Note: This includes only the states with election jurisdictions that can be mapped to counties. Results are subject to change using complete codings or alternative measures of rurality.*

### Qualitative Project

Two of the major goals of this part of the project were to explore the unique challenges of election administration in the Mississippi River Delta Region and then, more specifically, what were the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the experiences of local election officials (LEOs) in rural jurisdictions? The original plan for generating data toward these ends were focus groups with local election officials. Due to scheduling and logistical challenges related to rurality, individual interviews with local election officials were used instead (see below for more details on these challenges).

**Figure 2:** *Counties Included in Qualitative Project*



Qualitative interviews were conducted in six states in the Mississippi River Delta Region (AR, IL, KY, MO, MS, TN with LA refusing to participate—see [Figure 2](#)). Using a discussion guide developed with input from our LEO partner in Arkansas. The interviews involved a mix of county clerks, deputy clerks and administrators with titles and office responsibilities varying by state and jurisdiction. The full list of jurisdictions is included in [Table 1](#) below.<sup>2</sup>

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes depending on the length of responses and opportunities to ask follow-up questions. The interviews took place in private environments, as best could be managed, in order to remove concerns about speaking freely or being overheard by other colleagues and/or citizens doing business in the office. In all but one jurisdiction, interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

### **Challenges for LEOs in the Mississippi Delta**

Through our interviews we identified several themes across most jurisdictions. Many were positive and counter to the experiences reported in the extant literature for their more urban counterparts. However, there were some exceptions to these positive trends, and they are unlikely to reverse in the near future. There were four primary challenges consistently identified by the rural LEOs:

- 1) Difficulty in communicating with voters was consistently identified as one of the primary problems encountered by LEOs. And, the more rural, the more acute the challenges. Extreme rurality presents systemic challenges that their more urban counterparts are less likely to encounter in effectively communicating required information to the dispersed constituencies. This quote

<sup>2</sup>This phase of the project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Arkansas State University.

**Table 1: Counties Included in Study, Demographics, and LEO Duties**

State	Administrator	Other Duties	County	Population	Change	Median Age	African American	Square Miles	RUC Code
AR		Bookkeeper, Recorder	Chicot	10,208	-13.5%	43.5	53.8%	691	7
			Mississippi	40,685	-12.5%	36.9	36.0%	920	4
			Phillips	16,568	-23.8%	40.8	62.6%	727	6
			St. Francis	23,090	-18.3%	39.3	52.5%	643	6
IL	County Clerk	Recorder, Taxes, Vital Records	Alexander	5,240	-36.4%	47.5	30.8%	253	3
			Pulaski	5,193	-15.7%	44.3	30.1%	203	8
			Ballard	7,728	-6.3%	44.7	3.8%	274	9
KY		Automobiles, Recorder, Taxes	Carlisle	4,826	-5.4%	42.3	1.9%	199	9
			Fulton	6,813	-4.4%	41.1	24.3%	231	9
			Mississippi	12,577	-12.4%	40.4	22.6%	429	6
MO		Budgets, Taxes, Recorder	New Madrid	16,434	-13.3%	42.1	16.2%	697	7
			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	8
			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	5
			Lake	7,005	-10.6%	40.2	26.9%	194	9
			Lauderdale	25,143	-9.6%	39.2	34.8%	508	6

<sup>a</sup> There are (in some cases, dozens of) other duties for all these officials.

<sup>b</sup> RUC = Rural-Urban Continuum Codes from the USDA Economic Research Service.

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.” This, along with the lack of radio station coverage, intermittent to no consistent internet service, and lack of other print media, severely hinders all but word of mouth communication of the most basic of 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. However, this problem has one unique rural aspect, that is out migration due to lack of economic and educational opportunities. With a shrinking pool of eligible workers, rural LEO’s often are not meeting state requirements regarding minimum standards for election administration in terms of required poll workers. The second part of that equation is an aging population that is becoming increasingly unable to work 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: “Its getting harder and harder to find them [election workers] and the stakes keep getting higher and higher.”
- 3) While not widespread, the third challenge is troubling and could become more widespread. Several LEOs encountered issues with the United States Postal Service slow to accommodate vote-by-mail ballots that must arrive by election day. With many rural jurisdictions relying on urban mail centers, often two hours or more away by ground transportation, there are ballots that are not being counted. Given recent consolidations in mail service this issue could become more problematic in rural jurisdictions in the future. As an example, one official commented:

“All of our mail goes to Memphis to be sorted, and sometimes ballots arrive more than two weeks late.”

- 4) The fourth and final challenge identified by LEOs were the issues created by shifting party and demographic dynamics. 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 with some already in violation of that statute. One official noted that “It takes people to run an election and we have such a hard time getting the right mix of people.” In sum, apart from the age-related issues in recruiting election workers, none of the challenges were exacerbated by pandemic conditions.

### **Opportunities for LEOs in the Mississippi Delta**

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:

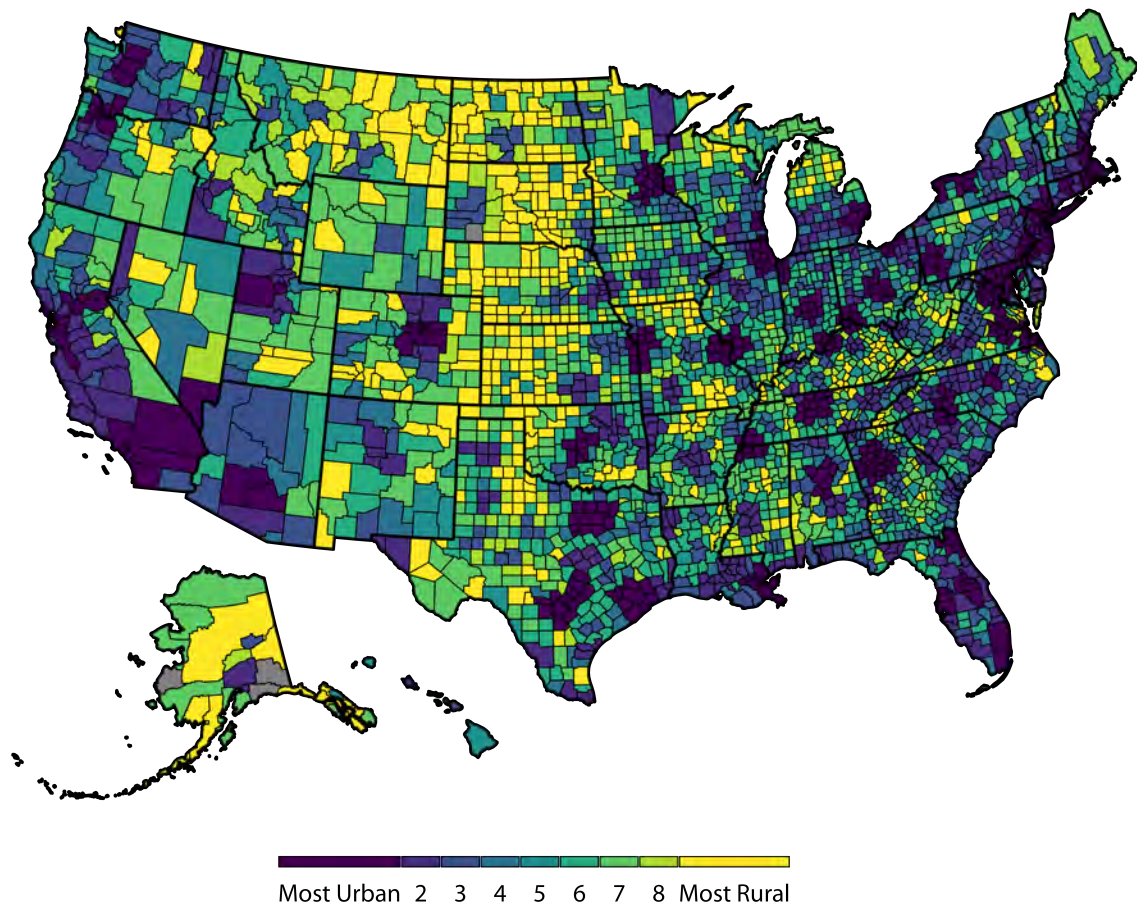
- 1) They were prideful in how they believe rurality translates in to being smaller and providing more and easier access for voters. They often mentioned the ease of registering and voting in their localities with particular emphasis in how they often know all the voters. Further, they indicated ease of voting in terms of fewer people translating into lack of waiting times to vote, ease of parking with no traffic concerns and a host of other things related to lack of population density. One official commented that: “We don’t deal with all the problems you see on the news.”
- 2) There was broad consensus that the 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 trusted them locally. One official put it this way: “They [the voters] trust their county and nobody else.”
- 3) LEOs believe that they had the confidence of voters in their jurisdictions that elections were open and fair. Combining the two above, most 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 could be due to the general “small town” nature of these jurisdictions as one official commented: “Everyone here knows everyone else. While they may not trust what’s happening in big cities, they trust us here.”

- 4) LEOs in the Delta region were extremely positive (e.g., “we could not get by without it”) 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.
- 5) Every LEO we 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 things like extended operating hours or allowing vote by mail. All six states were all judged by the LEOs in our sample as highly supportive with supplies and materials during the pandemic. For example, one official noted: “We could not have asked for more support from our state offices during the pandemic.”

By and large, with the exception mentioned in lone challenge above, the perspective of the LEOs in our sample 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 are not immediately apparent from the qualitative interviews that were conducted. We hope to utilize our quantitative data to further explore the impact of rurality on election administration in this unique subregion of America.

### **Quantitative Analysis of Administrative Data**

In this portion of the project we aimed to systematically examine the impact of rurality on election performance. An example data source for measuring rurality is shown below in [Figure 3](#). These data are available from the USDA ERS, but we also provide crosswalks for these and other measures of rurality on the project Github.

**Figure 3:** *Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (2013 Version)*

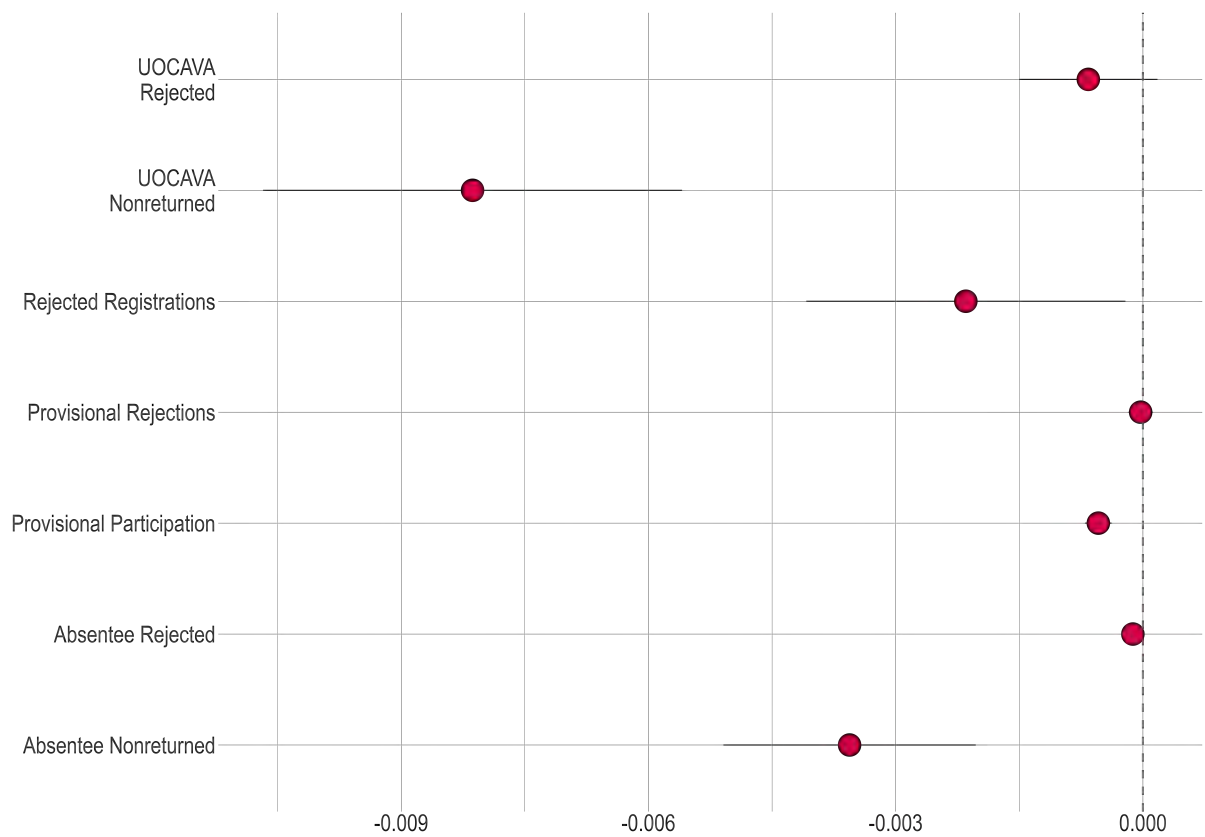
*Note: This is the scale of rurality employed by the USDA Economic Research Service.*

Our initial multivariate results suggest that variation in rurality does not explain much in terms of typical measures of elections performance, although in some cases we found that rural jurisdictions performed slightly better—perhaps due to lower demands on processing ballots, less voters, less pressure, etc. Realistically, however, this part of the project is still ongoing in terms of conducting analyses and writing up results. We met more challenges in data compatibility than expected and thus our efforts thus far have been on subsets of the data where those issues did not arise. In [Figure 4](#) we present the results of a preliminary series of linear models regressing various election performance outcomes on rurality as measured via USDA rural-urban continuum codes. While we find these results interesting, it should be noted that the caveats about data compatibility above still apply and more work needs to be done both on that front and fully specifying the series of models.

As an example of the type of things we can explore in this general framework, [Figure 5](#) presents the variation in use of electronic pollbooks across rurality. Much like the trends for technology in the qualitative project, we see some drop-off in electronic pollbooks across this dimension of rurality.

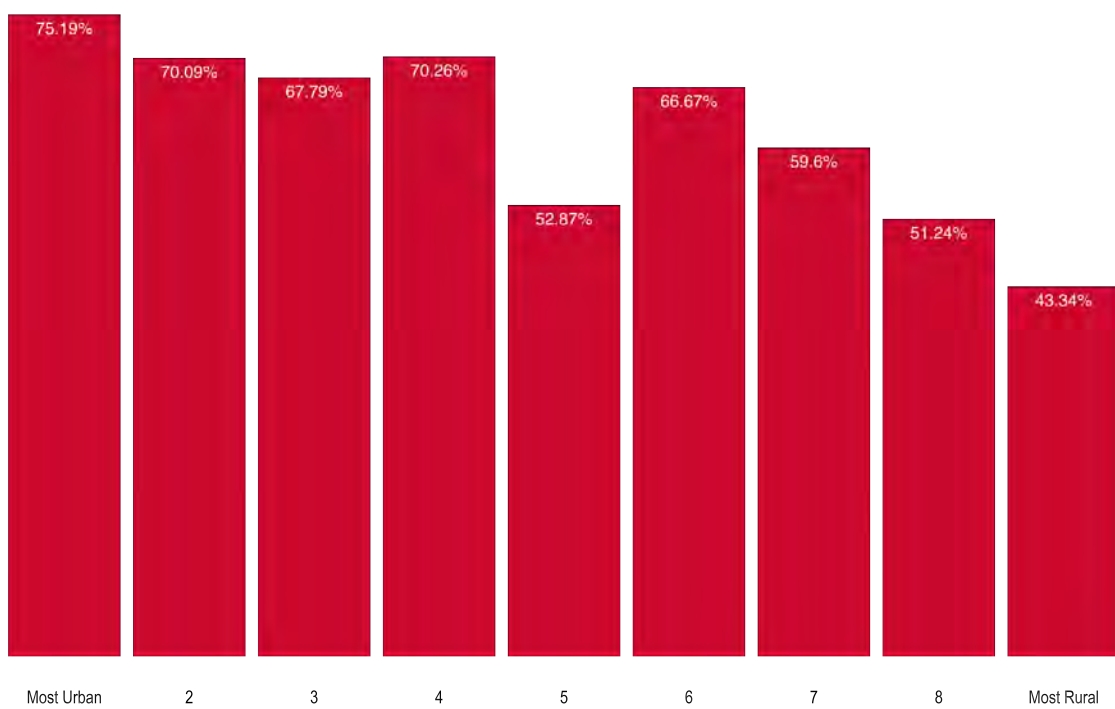


**Figure 4:** *The Impact of Rurality on Measures of Election Performance*



*Note: This includes only the states with election jurisdictions that can be mapped to counties. Results are subject to change using complete codings or alternative measures of rurality. Data source: 2020 EAVS and 2013 release of USDA ERS RUC Codes.*

**Figure 5:** Variation in Use of Electronic Pollbooks Across One Dimension of Rurality



*Note: This includes only the states with election jurisdictions that can be mapped to counties. Results are subject to change using complete codings or alternative measures of rurality. Data source: 2020 EAVS and 2013 release of USDA ERS RUC Codes.*

### Products

For our project we produced forty-eight datasets, made four presentations with two more planned, and we have three papers in progress. These are detailed below:

#### Datasets

- We produced a dataset for each state that was coded as part of the website coding portion of the project.
- We produced an additional dataset including information on rurality from various sources.

These data are available on the project [Github](#).

#### Presentations

- Our first presentation was at the SPSA pre-workshop required by the grant.
- We made three presentations at the ESRA conference, each related to a portion of our project.
- We completed a Q&A with the MEDSL team on 9/15/23.
- Finally, we presented a webinar on the University of Minnesota Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs [webinar series](#) on 10/11/23.

#### Papers

We are currently working on one paper for each of our project areas.

- The first paper is framed in the context of public policy and e-governance as it relates to the variation in the availability web tools across the range of rurality.
- The second paper discusses our qualitative findings from the Mississippi Delta. This paper has been submitted for review in a peer-reviewed journal, results are pending.
- The third paper is aimed as a more traditional quantitative analysis of administrative data framed in the contemporary election science literature.

### Participants

In addition to the primary grantees we hired several undergraduate researchers at Arkansas State University. These included Hye Sun Choi, Ellie Foote, Hwiyeon Kim, Ann Marie Long, William Partain, Hailee Reeves, Jacob Strawn, and Kaleb Webb. These undergraduate researchers primarily participated in the jurisdictional coding project. We also consulted with Ms. Jennifer Clack, Director of Elections in Craighead County, AR, throughout the life of the project. The only other project

participants were members of the actual group being study with respect to county election officials throughout the Mississippi Delta.

### **Impact**

Broadly defined, the major contribution of our project is expanding the understanding of election administration in an area that has largely been left out of the broader discussions in the field. Our research highlights the need to think of election administration as highly variable, even within regions and states, and not as a monolithic enterprise. Expansion of election science studies into a six-state region of the Mississippi River Delta sheds light on election administration in small, rural jurisdictions with complicated racial, economic and political histories that have previously gone unexplored. The snapshot we provide through our qualitative individual interviews with LEOs and our data collection and quantitative analyses helps present a more nuanced view of rural America where over half of the counties are rural.

Our research highlights well the difference in both the challenges and opportunities and the differences in urban versus rural areas. Many of our assumptions were confirmed in our interviews with rural LEOs where systemic and structural issues present unique challenges that are rarely present or nonexistent in urban areas. Whether it be communication issues related lack of newspaper availability or recruiting poll workers from an aging population (a problem that existed pre pandemic) to unreliable mail service to shifting partisan identities, rural election officials confront an extremely challenging landscape that is unlikely to see improvement and only worsen over time. Just as many of the systemic and structural issues that present themselves as challenges, they can also have some positive benefits. We find that rural LEOs enjoy a much greater level of trust and feel more support from their constituents than do their urban counterparts, they do not experience harassment or threats of physical harm and rural voters have much easier access to polling places both in terms of lack of wait times and personal relationships with clerks.

Further, some of our findings are counterintuitive. We know that LEOs who practice in smaller and more remote areas operate in a in a system characterized by financially limited organizations, small populations, lack of collegial support, limited access to advanced technologies and relatively high fixed costs per delivered service. Following that, we would expect that an extreme situation like the Covid-19 would only compound already existing issues. However, that was not the case. Rural LEOs reported uniformly positive experiences with election administration during that difficult time not only with managing the regular workload but even with expanded access to the ballot box in many jurisdictions.

The LEOs involved in our study were mostly welcoming and interested to know that those of us studying elections were interested in them and their jurisdictions. We learned from introductory and post-interview conversations that almost none of them had heard of academic efforts to study elections and most were very much interested in tools like the EPI, for example. It was rewarding to introduce a new sub-sample of LEOs to the broader field of election science, and our hope is that this both increases scholarly and external interest in the region and spurs some of these LEOs to join broader conversations about election administration.

Our project introduced a new cohort of undergraduate students to the election science field. This was a meaningful experience in several ways as paid undergraduate research has historically been less common at our institution. We were proud to buck that tradition and hopefully start a new one. The students tremendously enjoyed learning about election administration and the ways by which things vary across states and jurisdictions. One (now former) undergraduate student, Ellie Foote, played a major role leading the coding of the project and developed and presented a poster at the ESRA conference in Athens, GA. Several others are eager to get involved in additional projects and keep working on future iterations of this one.

Finally, we hope that our initial work through this project helps generate interest in this generally unexplored aspect of variation in election administration. It has certainly created a new research agenda for us that we plan to continue for the foreseeable future.

### **Changes and/or Problems**

The most significant problem that we encountered was the challenge of scheduling focus groups with multiple election officials. Although in some cases (e.g., primarily in TN) rural counties had dedicated election officials, most of the participants in our study were county clerks (or the equivalent) who had responsibility over much more than just elections. This led us to change our method of qualitative data collection from focus groups to in-depth interviews. In the end we found this to be a benefit as developing trust and open dialogue was much easier in private than we expected it to be in a larger group setting. The possible downside is that, in the PI's experience, focus groups can sometime lead to discussions that are less likely in an in-depth interview.<sup>3</sup> We cannot know for sure if this would have occurred, but we are also confident that the method we used yielded better results than the alternative.

A less significant, albeit unexpected, problem was that officials in Louisiana refused to participate after initially agreeing during our proposal phase. It was unclear if it was just by random chance none

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<sup>3</sup>For example, participants with shared expertise can mention something the jogs the memory or interest of another participant and leads to interesting discussion.

of the officials we spoke to were interested or something larger that created a culture within the state. Several of those officials indicated they would need a letter from the Secretary of State allowing them to participate and we felt any effort to obtain that might either bring negative attention to our effort or the broader efforts of MEDSL. As such, we decided not to pursue participation from officials in Louisiana any further.

With respect to the qualitative phase of the study specifically, there are potential limitations in generalizability given that we only interviewed LEOs in rural counties situated in the Mississippi Delta region. We cannot say with total confidence that our findings are representative of all rural LEOs and jurisdictions. It is equally challenging to suggest that our findings are in complete contrast to what we might find in urban areas. Nevertheless, our goal was to focus on this region and broaden the study in future efforts.

The final challenge we encountered was how to best capture rurality for election jurisdictions that exist below the county level. Most extant measures of rurality exist only down to the county level. Although it is possible to generalize those (e.g., Wisconsin and New England) smaller jurisdictions to counties, it is unclear if this is the best approach. This creates problems for data completeness, generalization, and inference that remain unsolved. On the other hand, our qualitative experience tells us in some cases that there are counties where the experience for the voters in the areas outside of smaller-size cities is much different than those in the cities (typically in these cases the county seat). This calls for a more granular way to measure rurality but the options are limited how that can be accomplished.

### **Acknowledgments**

We wish to thank the entire MEDSL team and partners at Pew for the support. It was also great to meet, see, and learn from so many other scholars and election officials at the various meetings during the grant period. We are gracious that our project was of interest to the broader effort and look forward to continuing our efforts in this area of examining the impact of rurality on election administration.

## **Appendix: Study Invite, Consent Form, and Discussion Guide**

The pages that follow include the IRB-approved consent form and discussion guide.

**CONSENT FORM**  
**Rural Election Administration Project**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent. You have been asked to participate in a research study about election administration in rural areas. The purpose of this study is to better understand the unique challenges to effective election administration posed by rurality. You were selected to be a possible participant because this phase of the study focuses on jurisdictions in the Mississippi Delta Region.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. This discussion will take approximately 90 minutes.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated in this study are minimal and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study except participating in a discussion with your peers; however, the study will produce enhanced understanding of how rurality affects election administration.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Arkansas State University being affected.

**Will I be compensated?**

No, there is no compensation for participation. You will be given a small gift card as a token of appreciation of your time.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

The researchers will take care to remove any reference to you, your office, or the name of your jurisdiction in any results published from the study.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Cameron Wimpy (870) 930-7311 or [cwimpy@astate.edu](mailto:cwimpy@astate.edu).

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Arkansas State University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact the IRB office at (870) 972-2694 or [jlestes@astate.edu](mailto:jlestes@astate.edu).

**Statement**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By stating yes, you agree, you consent to participate in this study.

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_



# 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 time constraints are present, the discussion guide will be adapted for 60 minute sessions. The order of activities 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.)

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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 of 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.)

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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.)

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[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 you 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.)**

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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.)**

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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.