

Documenting and Addressing Harassment of Election Officials

Frontline Workers for Democracy



JUNE 9TH, 2021

TRIGGER WARNING

The content described in this presentation is violent and may be disturbing.

AGENDA



Overview



Research Intentions



Election Structure



Background



Findings



Recent Examples



Recommendations

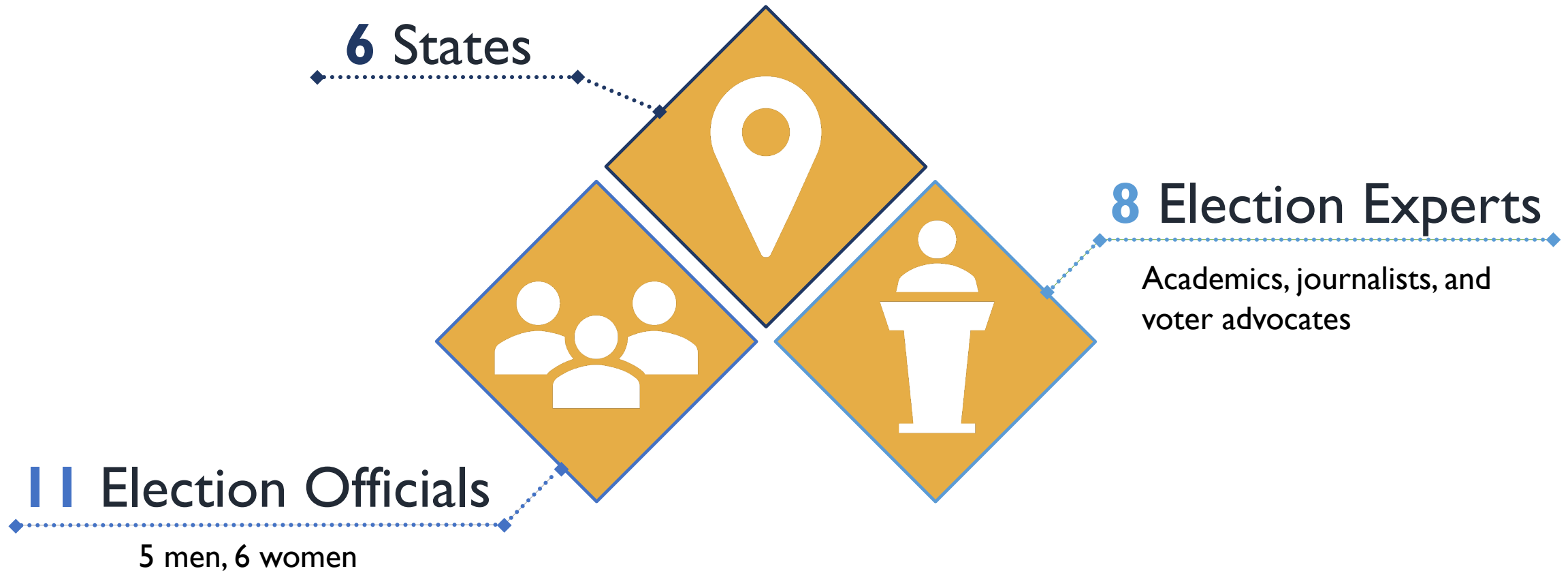


Current Initiatives



Panel Discussion

OVERVIEW



RESEARCH INTENTIONS



UNDERSTAND
EXPERIENCES



COMPREHEND
IMPACT



BRAINSTORM
RECOMMENDATIONS

ELECTION STRUCTURE

State Level

Chief Election Official (CEO)

- Varies state by state
- Eg. Secretary of State
- Eg. Lieutenant Governor

Local Level

Local Election Official (LEO)

- Many different titles
- Eg. County Clerk
- Eg. Registrar of Voters

BACKGROUND



Growing complexities of
election administration

Elections as ***critical infrastructure***



Chronic ***underfunding***
of elections

Defining a ***threat***

Gender, Mis- and Disinformation

- 75% of local election officials are women
 - Misogyny

BACKGROUND

Threats in the age of the internet

- Election officials may experience harassment differently from the average internet user.
- On the internet, without the physical clues of facial expression and larger context, speech could easily be misinterpreted as a threat.

FINDINGS



- **10 out of 11** election officials interviewed due to their experiences receiving death threats, other threats, or abusive language.
- 4 reported death threats
- 7 reported other threats
- 6 reported abusive language

FINDINGS



“ [People in my office were] threatened to be shot, threatened to be beaten, and so this is what we were going through...”

- Many officials saw **speaker intent** as a key factor in whether aggressive speech is merely a complaint or potentially illegal threats and harassment.
- Differences in the way that election officials defined the term “harassment” indicate a deeper, societal problem with the term (and the act) of harassment: people, especially people in positions of authority, do not want to be seen as weak or impacted by the actions of others who intend to do harm.

FINDINGS



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

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

“ *The election cycle of 2020 was the most contentious, traumatic experience of my professional life.* ”

FINDINGS



- For officials who contacted law enforcement agencies in response to threats or harassment, there was **no discernable follow up.**

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

FINDINGS



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

➤ **Unknowns:**

We don't know what the level of harassment is across all sectors but can see in the public sector health care officials, election officials and elected politicians have all been targeted.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS



Predicting a **mass exodus** of election officials



Institutional **knowledge**



Recognizing the **professionalism** of the field

“ [If] what happened in 2020 continues to happen on a regular basis we're going to fall apart from within. ”

RECENT EXAMPLES



Essential Politics: California's election official exodus

Los Angeles Times, April 12, 2021

Head of San Luis Obispo elections responds to “Inexcusable racial slur” during voting debate

KEYT, May 5, 2021

Election officials faced ‘unprecedented harassment’ during Anchorage mayor’s runoff

Anchorage Daily News, May 27, 2021

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS



REDUCE CONFLICT



BUILD CAPACITY



I. PUBLIC EDUCATION



Improve **public education** to combat mis- and disinformation

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



2. LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE



Strengthen **law enforcement** response to incidents of harassment

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



3. FUNDING AND RESOURCES



Expand **funding and resources** for election administration

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



4. LEGAL PROTECTION



Strengthen **legal protection** for election officials

- ❖ Develop legislation to protect election officials by making it easier for them to pursue legal action in response to death threats and other threats.
- ❖ Explore the expansion of federal law to address interference in any election.
- ❖ Start a repository within the federal government to collect and document threats against election officials and coordinate responses to such threats.



5. CROSS-SECTOR NETWORK



Build a **cross-sector network** of support for election officials

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

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE



Local election infrastructure is critical infrastructure.

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

PROTECTING ELECTION OFFICIALS FROM DIGITAL THREATS

**Running Elections Without Fear
Ensuring Physical Safety
for Election Personnel**

Issued by The Elections Group

THE ROAD FORWARD

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

VOTE  HOME

NATIONAL VOTE AT HOME INSTITUTE

**THE LONG FUSE:
MISINFORMATION AND THE 2020 ELECTION**



THANK YOU!



The report and slide deck are available at:

www.calvoter.org/harassment

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