

Incompetent Pollworkers

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Taxonomy:

Wholesale, probabilistic, administrative
Applicability: All voting systems

Method:

The perpetrator ensures that the pollworkers in the favored party than the pollworkers in precincts supporting the opposing party. This may be done by deliberate assignment of pollworkers based on competence. It may be done by providing different quality of training depending on where the pollworkers are assigned, or by other means. A subtle way to do this is to provide only limited pollworker training through official channels and then offer supplementary training outside the system for selected pollworkers. An even more subtle way to do this is to assign pollworkers to their home precincts, relying on the educational demographics of the precincts to assure that, on the average, well educated voters have well educated pollworkers while poorly educated voters have poorly educated pollworkers.

In precincts with well-prepared pollworkers, fewer errors will be made, and the voters will therefore have a higher likelihood of having their votes counted. Typical pollworker errors include improperly turning away legitimate voters, improperly admitting illegitimate voters, failure to properly administer provisional ballots, failure to give proper instruction to voters requiring such instruction, failure to handle spoiled ballots properly, and many others. Resource requirements: The perpetrator must be in a position to control the assignment of pollworkers or their training. Direct control makes this form of fraud easy, but indirect control, for example, through legislation, can be quite effective in cases where poorly educated voters are more likely to support the opposition party.

Potential gain:

Rates of voter and pollworker error have exceeded 10% in some jurisdictions during some elections. If this error can be controlled so that these high rates occur primarily in communities where opposition voters are likely to vote, the net benefit, in terms of the final election total, could easily be on the order of 1% or more.

Likelihood of detection:

Proof of deliberate discrimination based on this model is extremely difficult. Carelessness in election administration is so common at all levels that distinguishing between manipulated carelessness and random carelessness can be close to impossible. Similarly, educationally disadvantaged voters have a natural tendency to make errors, and this can easily mask the effects of this attack.

While difficult to prove, this attack is likely to be widely understood by the voters. Voters in precincts with poorly trained pollworkers generally notice their overall incompetence, and voters in precincts with good pollworkers generally notice that. Thus, this approach to election manipulation falls into the classic category of fraud classes where everyone knows about it but nobody can pin it on anyone.

Countermeasures:

Preventative measures:

Random assignment of pollworkers to precincts can equalize the training across the jurisdiction. On the other hand, this reduces the likelihood that the pollworkers at the precinct will personally know the voters. That makes the precinct more friendly and welcoming, and it can deter classic retail forms of vote fraud such as repeat voting.

Standardized education for all pollworkers can help immensely. Competently designed training courses, instructional materials and official pollworker manuals are very important.

Genuine objective tests of pollworker competence would be desirable, so that pollworkers could be selected based not only on residence and partisan criteria, but also on the basis of ability.

Detection measures:

Post election audits that count pollworker errors by precinct would be incredibly valuable. If the precinct-by-precinct or county-by-county error rate has a strong correlation with the electoral demographics of the precincts, this should be taken as strong evidence that this attack is taking place, although it does not pin the blame on anyone.

Election observers can also record pollworker errors for similar audits. Where observation is sufficiently widespread to get a statistical picture of the error rate across an entire jurisdiction to allow an examination of the correlation with the electoral demographics, this attack can be identified.

Citations:

Joseph P. Harris, Election Administration in the United States, The Brookings Institution, 1934. Widespread pollworker incompetence is discussed on page 35. Inadequate pollworker training is discussed on page 96.

Edmund F. Kallina, Jr. Courthouse over White House -- Chicago and the Presidential Election of 1960, University Presses of Florida, 1988. Widespread pollworker incompetence is discussed on pages 81 and 82, with considerable documentation based on election observers and press reports.

Joel Engelhardt and Scott McCabe, Poll workers ignored flaws in pre-vote machine tests, Palm Beach Post, December 9, 2001, demonstrates in one narrow area, pre-election equipment testing of Votomatic machines, that pollworker errors continue today at an astonishingly high rate. Over 11% of the test ballots used, at the precinct, on election morning, showed unpunched positions that should have been punched, yet not a single machine was reported as being non-functional. This is evidence that the test results were being ignored!

The two unofficial recounts conducted by the press after election 2000 clearly show correlations between voter error rates and both political and racial demographics. Unfortunately, there has not been a similarly intense examination of pollworker error rates.

Retrospective:

This form of election failure is clearly a violation of the voter's right to be weighed equally, but it is so difficult to prove and the institutions that lead to it are so entrenched that it is probably among the most difficult election failures to deal with. It is highly unlikely that most of the failures in this category are the result of deliberate fraud. Rather "this is the way we have always done things" is probably the dominant explanation.