



## Why Local Elected Leaders Should Talk to Local Election Administrators

### WHAT ARE ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS?

These are the administrative officials who manage and run elections. In most states, election administrators operate at the local level.

Depending on the state, the way the local election administrators operate may vary. Power could be vested in a single individual or split between multiple people working as a board or committee. They could be elected by the general populace or appointed by an executive or council. The office may be explicitly focused on elections—like a Board of Registrars of Voters or a Supervisor of Elections—or might administer elections along with other duties—like a City/County Clerk, Tax Assessor, or Recorder.

However, their powers and responsibilities are often very similar. Subject to the laws of the state, these election administrators usually:

- Receive voter registrations and applications for mail-in ballots
- Maintain lists of voters<sup>1</sup>
- Decide where polling places, early voting locations, and drop-boxes will be placed
- Prepare for in-person elections (rent space, train poll workers, buy equipment, etc.)
- Administer in-person elections, including early voting
- Count and track ballots (including absentee ballots)
- Report election results and conduct post-election audits

### HOW TO ENGAGE LOCAL ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS

It is important that you build a relationship with whoever is in charge of running the 2020 elections in your community. Local elected leaders are well positioned to be a bridge between these election administrators and residents. As a representative of your jurisdiction, you must work to ensure every eligible voter can safely vote and advocate for changes that will keep voters safe this November. A few ways that you can engage with local election administrators before your primaries and the general are:

- Hold a virtual town-hall meeting with local election administrators and community members to better understand the precautions they will be taking
- Ask them to provide your office with their written plans for protecting and informing voters amidst COVID-19
- Support efforts to get local elections administrators the resources they need to make adjustments to safely and fairly conduct elections during pandemic conditions
- Call on local elections administrators or state decision-makers directly to address community concerns
- Lift up the precautions and steps that can be taken to ensure voting remains safe during the pandemic by writing an op-ed in your local paper

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<sup>1</sup> Voting purges can occur as either a directive from the state, or can come from the local election administrator, making this power one of the most important ones an administrator may have.

- Get similarly minded elected officials on board and write a sign-on letter to your local election administrator

## WHY ENGAGE LOCAL ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS

### Number 1: Ensuring Your Community Needs Are Met

Talking to your local election administrators is important to ensure they are using their powers equitably and in a way that recognizes the needs of your community. Local election administrators are typically the officials who decide on polling locations and how they are staffed. They may have the decision making authority of how to implement state-level directives that determine how many polling places go in your community.<sup>2</sup> You have the on-the-ground knowledge of what voting was like for your constituents. Building a relationship with your local election administrator means you can be an ally to ensuring they have what they need to conduct a safe election, and to provide a way to redress issues that your constituents have faced in previous elections. Are there consistently long lines at one polling place? Does any particular location seem to run out of ballots or suffer mechanical malfunctions? This is information that you can provide your local elected administrator beyond simply looking at a spreadsheet of numbers, which they likely already do when they make their decisions on upcoming elections.

Establishing a relationship with your local election administrator is especially important if they are not elected. If they are not directly accountable to the electorate, then your constituents are less likely to know who to contact when things go wrong at their polling place. Local election administrators may also be more willing to treat polling place location as a math problem and not give sufficient weight to the human element involved and the disparities that are seen across communities based on socioeconomic status and race. It becomes all the more important for you to ensure that you are using your leverage as a public servant and leader in these situations to voice their concerns.

### Number 2: Ensuring You Have Answers for Your Community

Your local election administrator can provide you with key information for voters that you can easily pass on to your constituents. Local election administrators are making important decisions mere months ahead of elections. These include:

- How many early voting sites there will be and where will they be located;
- If there are and where there will be drop boxes for mail-in ballots; and
- Any changes to polling locations.

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<sup>2</sup> In Kentucky, County Clerks had to submit plans for approval by the State Board of Elections that would reduce the number of polling locations in each county. The instructions from the Board of Elections never specified that the cut had to be as drastic as the 95% of polling places that County Clerks closed. This disproportionately affected Black voters, most of whom live in Jefferson County and only had one polling place they could attend. Though closures had to be pre-approved, a well-timed intervention from local elected leaders could have given them more room to push back on the order. In any case, this is a clear demonstration of the power of local election administrators, who choose how statewide policy is enacted. See Ben Tobin, *Jefferson, Fayette counties will not have to add additional polling locations, judge rules*, Louisville Courier Journal, June 18, 2020, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2020/06/18/kentucky-elections-judge-rules-against-forcing-more-polling-locations/3211751001/>; Seth Cohen, *Jim Crow 2.0? How Kentucky's Poll Closures Could Suppress Black Votes*, Forbes, June 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/06/22/kentucky-and-jim-crow-2-dot-0/>.

Additionally, with the COVID-19 pandemic posing a continued threat to communities across the world and especially in our nation, being in the know is vital. There is a much greater chance that there could be last-minute changes in response to the pandemic both due to litigation and or external contingencies. This could involve protocols for voting in person, how to secure voting materials, and new voting-related deadlines. That makes having a good relationship with your local election administrator all the more important. If and when these changes occur, you should be one of the first people to know about it so you can communicate that information immediately and directly to your members and constituents.

### Number 3: Ensuring You Understand What Your Local Election Administrator Needs

Beyond helping local election administrators understand the facts on the ground of your community, you can also empower them through your position as a local elected leader. In some places, local election administrator budgets are set by county or city electeds—this may be a way you can advocate for them or help them get the resources they need to keep our elections safe this year.<sup>3</sup> In other places, the local election administrators may want changes to be made by the state government but are uncomfortable advocating for them because they are in an appointed role. In this situation, you can help advocate for the changes that they need at the state level, such as online voter registration, no-excuse absentee voting, ballots having postmark due dates instead of received by due dates, and more. And in those instances, even beyond advocating for reforms and actions at a state level, you may be able to make some of them yourself at the county or city level. A local election administrator who wants something as simple as the state sending everyone an absentee ballot application can be greatly assisted by their county passing an ordinance to send all county voters an absentee ballot application. Multiple counties passing ordinances like that can force state action, even if only for partisan reasons.<sup>4</sup> There are myriad ways in which you can assist your local elected administrator, and doing so will not only help elections run safely and smoothly, but will make it easier for you to address issues that your constituents have with their electoral experience.

## CONCLUSION

We all want people to be able to vote both this summer and in November without fearing for their health and lives. Local election administrators have the ability to help shape what voting will look like and can

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<sup>3</sup> It is not unusual for localities to pay over 90% of their election costs. COVID-19 has raised those costs in the midst of budgetary shortfalls. Even generous federal funding may only account for 18% of the state's budget, leaving localities incapable of getting all the funds necessary to make all possible improvements. Elizabeth Howard et al, *Ensuring Safe Elections*, Brennan Center, 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/ensuring-safe-elections>.

<sup>4</sup> Milwaukee's Common Council unanimously voted to send absentee ballot applications to all of its registered voters. It is likely that this decision, which would provide applications to 300,000 voters and could make up as much as 10% of Milwaukee's total turnout, heavily influenced the Wisconsin Elections Commission's unanimous decision in May to send registered voters in the state absentee ballot applications. Patrick Marley, *Wisconsin election officials agree to mail absentee ballot request forms to most voters*, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, May 27, 2020, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2020/05/27/wisconsin-officials-take-up-mailing-absentee-ballot-request-forms/5262753002/>; Alison Dirr, *Milwaukee Common Council votes to mail absentee ballot applications to city's registered voters*, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, April 21, 2022, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/04/21/milwaukee-council-votes-mail-absentee-ballot-applications/2995101001/>.

plan to make it easier and safer. But if they are going to do that effectively, they will need your help just as you will need theirs. You have been empowered by your constituents to be their voice, and many of them may not even know the power local election officials hold and are unaware of the decisions they make, making you the best person to protect their interests. It is imperative that you work with your local election administrator to ensure that voters can safely exercise their fundamental rights.