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# The Path to Becoming an Underpaid, Underappreciated and Absolutely Necessary Election Poll Worker

By Spenser Mestel

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Diane Burrows, former schoolteacher, current poll worker. Credit: Lily Landes for The New York Times

On the morning of the 2016 presidential election, a line was forming outside of the Julia Richman Educational Complex, a polling site on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It was Trump vs. Clinton, and everyone had expected high turnout, but when a few of the site's scanners jammed, a crowd started to fill the auditorium as well.

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Diane Burrows, a poll worker, wasn't particularly concerned. She and the other temporary workers had hours of training, and they also had the poll worker manual on hand if any problems arose. But then, after the rush had died down, a man approached her and started ranting about his wife.

“My wife was here at 8 o'clock this morning trying to vote,” she remembers him saying, “and she had to wait two hours, so she just threw her ballot in the trash can and left.” When Ms. Burrows retells this part of the story, her eyes go wide in re-enacted shock, and for good reason. Every ballot, whether it's cast, voided, or left blank, is tracked on Election Day, and when the polls close at 9 p.m. — after poll workers have already been on the clock for at least 16 hours — each one must be accounted for.

Under ideal circumstances, that process can be as brief as 30 minutes. However, any discrepancy that can't be resolved requires poll workers to recheck the used ballot stubs, the voided ballots, and the printed results from the scanners. What isn't part of the protocol is sifting through the poll site's trash cans, which is how Ms. Burrows and her team found the woman's ballot after her husband's tirade. “She had no concept of what she'd done,” Ms. Burrows said, laughing. “I mean — we would still be there.”

Image



Chanise Jagiello distributing tests at a poll worker training session in Queens. Credit Lily Landes for The New York Times

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As the midterms approach amid reports of [voter suppression](#) and [foreign interference](#), it's easy to lose sight of the humble poll worker who is at the mechanical level of the city's electoral process.

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In many ways, Ms. Burrows is a model poll worker. After 27 years of teaching (five in high school English, the other 22 with fifth-graders), she's habitually patient, and she wasn't attracted to the job simply for the pay, which works out to about \$14 an hour. "I had a list of things I wanted to do when I retired," she said. "I wanted to pursue the League of Women Voters, and I wanted to learn how to be a poll worker."

Not all New Yorkers are as civic-minded. To fill the 34,000 or so vacancies for each election (roughly equal to the number of officers in the New York Police Department), the Board of Elections advertises throughout the city: on the subway, in local newspapers, through high school guidance counselors, and so on. Yet according to Michael Ryan, the executive director of the Board of Elections, recruitment is a perennial problem. For the upcoming primary, on Sept. 13, the board still must fill about 6,400 vacancies.

It's a process that must be repeated every cycle. Though as many as 15 percent of poll workers fail to show up for duty on Election Day, the biggest obstacle seems to be the mandatory four-hour training session before each election. Roughly 70 percent of its work force drops out between recruitment and actually working the polls. .

At her first training, Ms. Burrows was surprised that the instructor did little more than read the poll worker manual aloud to the class. "I guess because I'm a teacher, I'm used to a certain structure," she said. While she had a more engaging session this year, not all students get hands-on experience, even with the scanners, which are notorious for jamming, or the Ballot Marking Device, which helps voters with disabilities navigate the ballot. She left the first training session feeling less than optimistic. "I had no picture in my mind of how this was going to work," she said.

In 2013, following a report that the Board of Elections had "wasted at least \$2.4 million in city funds by failing to consolidate election districts during the November 2011 off-year elections," New York City's Department of Investigation again took aim at the board and recommended that it incorporate more hands-on training. The agency responded by saying that the \$100 compensation for trainees was "woefully inadequate." Under this kind of educational triage, the board's curriculum is best summarized by an instructor at a recent training in Bushwick, Brooklyn: "I don't want you to remember this," he said. "I want you to know how to use this manual to solve any problem you may have."

Image

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Typical signs that go up at polling sites around the city on Election Day. Credit Lily Landes for The New York Times

At the end of every class, prospective poll workers must pass an exam. It's open book, 20 multiple choice and true-false questions — and the quiz even gives the page number where the answer can be found. But according to prospective poll workers interviewed across Manhattan and Brooklyn and the 2013 report by the Department of Investigation, some trainees still lack the basic literacy skills to pass.

In the past eight years, an average of 8 percent of prospective poll workers have failed the test. And in 2015, it was 20 percent, or 1,031 people. This happened despite the fact that, according to the Department of Investigation report from 2013, investigators “observed trainers telling trainees the specific subjects to be covered on the exam before trainees took the exam, trainers effectively giving answers to trainees during the exam, or trainees cheating on the exam.”

In order to recruit more high-caliber workers, experts have suggested alternatives, but according to Mr. Ryan, each has its drawbacks. While college students' schedules may seem ideal to accommodate the sporadic, all-day staffings, elections often fall during CUNY's midterms. While municipal workers have already been vetted by the city and also get Election Day off, their recruitment partly depends on the cooperation of other government agencies, which is also the obstacle for another proposal — to waive jury duty for those who work the polls.

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Every year for the past eight years, the Board of Elections has asked the State Assembly to increase compensation for poll workers — this year by paying poll workers \$100 for the four-hour training and \$300 for the roughly 17 hours of work on Election Day. The proposal has never passed.

The result is an unusually integrated working environment, according to Jan Combopiano, who woke up at 3:30 for the 2017 mayoral election to travel from her home in Downtown Brooklyn to her assigned location in Greenpoint. She says that some of her co-workers were professionals, like her, who had taken the day off. “And then there were people who were out of work, who were like: ‘I want to do this to get paid. This money is a big deal to me.’” Regardless of income levels, though, she felt that everyone was united around a common goal: to help the voter.

That diversity was a selling point for David Iscoe, who would put himself in both of Ms Combopiano’s categories. “I’m motivated by civic duty to some sense,” he said. “But I’m also a freelance writer, and you need money.” After hearing about the job from a neighbor, he worked his first election in Park Slope in 2017 and recommends that all his friends give it a try. “You meet people who are not in the same social scene or day job,” he said, “so I think that’s good in just getting a sense of who’s in the community.”

Spenser Mestel has been a poll worker in three elections in New York, two presidential (2012 and 2016) and one primary (2016). He will be back at it for the Sept. 13 primary.

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