

PROTECT OUR ELECTION



*2020 Local Election Official Research Survey
Conducted by Protect Our Election, Feb-Apr 2021*

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 election cycle pushed our system of self-governance closer to the breaking point than any in living memory. And despite facing an unprecedented confluence of challenges, America's election officials pulled off the most secure election in our nation's history.

They made the most of inadequate funding, they installed safety measures to guard against COVID-19, they turned a potential shortage of poll workers into a surplus, they strengthened our cyber defenses, they fought disinformation, and they withstood a manipulative domestic political assault that called their competence and patriotism into question.

We owe them our gratitude - and we ought to start listening to them.

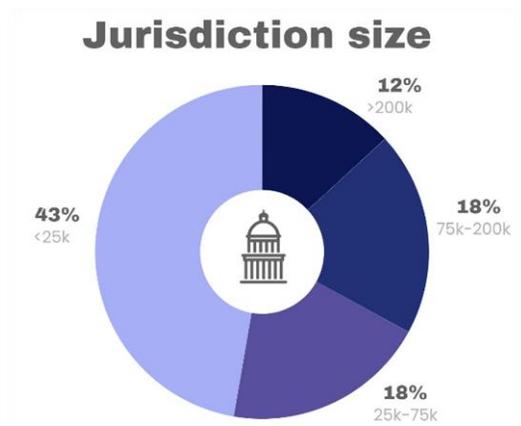
Protect Our Election's 2020 Local Election Official Research Survey is an attempt to capture post-election feedback from the people on the ground who power our democracy. It is an attempt to draw out what *they* need to ensure continued success, and an honest effort to measure *their* priorities. We view this report as a collaborative guide forward - a first step, but, we hope, an actionable one - for those interested in preserving the health of American democracy by strengthening the local institutions on which it stands.

METHODOLOGY

We contacted 4,605 local election officials around the country with an email invitation to complete a 122-question survey positioned as an after-action assessment. The initial outreach effort covered primary election officials from 3,045 counties or county-equivalents and 1,560 towns (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT). We received a 7.2% response rate from the county group, and a 9.3% response rate from the town officials, for an overall rate of 8.1%. The margin of error is calculated at 5% (within the standard accepted range).

Our respondents represented the full spectrum of population size, including Clark County (NV) and King County (WA) at the large end of the scale, with Madison County (NE) and Cheyenne County (CO) at the low end.

In sum, our sample reflects a cross-section of diverse jurisdiction sizes, with slightly more representation from mid-to-large counties over small-to-mid size counties. The survey was in the field from February-April 2021.



While we acknowledge the selection bias inherent in an online survey, our respondents cover 42 of 50 states, missing only AL, AK, DE, DC, HI, KY, LA, MD, and WY. We believe the distribution of population, geography, and partisan lean that we captured provides enough insight to draw qualitative conclusions from the data, particularly when paired with complimentary studies. Our raw data is available for media and partners upon request.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Our most notable findings ring true across all jurisdictions and states. Based on this direct feedback from local election officials (LEOs) on the ground, we can affirmatively draw the following conclusions:

- The 2020 election cycle impacted the way LEOs feel about their role in our democracy, with nearly a third of respondents saying they are considering a career change;
- In a concerning development for our democracy, LEOs reported feeling inappropriate partisan pressure from voters, party organizers, and elected officials at the state and federal level;
- LEOs felt that they had enough time to count and report accurate results, but a majority lacked staff support and funding throughout the cycle;
- Unsurprisingly, LEOs received a far higher number of public inquiries during the 2020 election cycle;
- Roughly half of our LEOs lack the time and resources to engage in proactive voter communications on digital platforms;
- Our LEOs roundly approved of the state-level assistance they received specific to COVID-19, but were not as complimentary about federal efforts;
- There is a distinct gap between the level of confidence our LEOs felt in their state's mail-in voting procedures and the perceived effectiveness of voter communication efforts related to mail-in voting;
- Security issues were a larger focus for LEOs in 2020, with large majorities reporting effective cybersecurity training and roughly half taking measures to prepare for the potential of domestic terrorism;

- 75% of LEOs in our survey report receiving public funds via the CARES Act, with 43% receiving grant money from non-governmental sources;
- Opinions are mixed on election reform efforts currently underway at the state and federal level, with most LEOs preferring a combination of action at all levels of government;

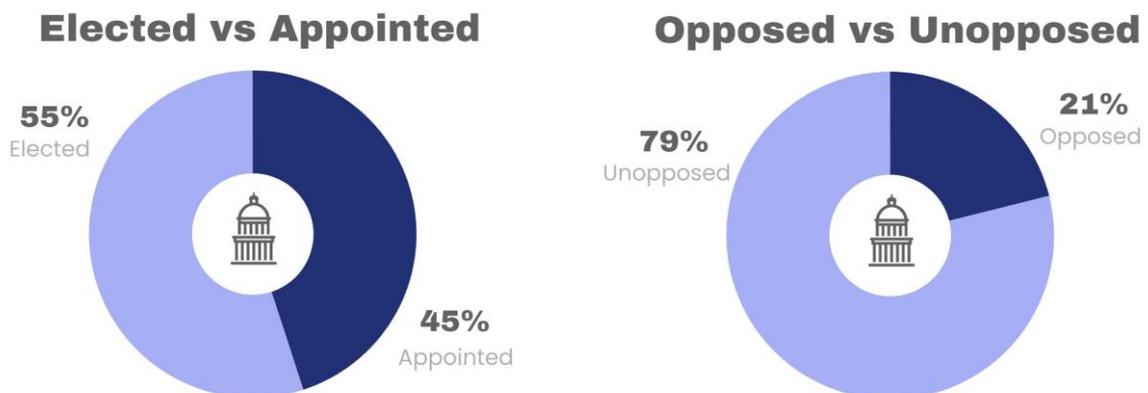
The body of this report will provide the data that drove these conclusions, and more, via a combination of quantitative data and qualitative comments from the LEOs who participated.

We have organized the findings into eight distinct sections.

JOB ACQUISITION & SATISFACTION

The process for filling LEO roles differs from state to state and county to county. In some jurisdictions, election administrators are themselves elected directly by the voters, and in others they are appointed by election boards or a specified public official.

We found a roughly even split among our respondents, and, of those who were elected directly, nearly 80% ran unopposed in their most recent race.

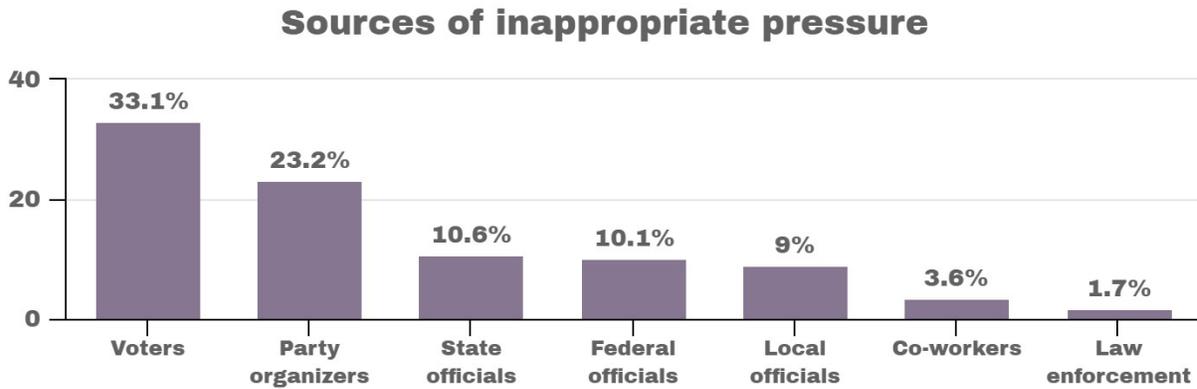


When asked to describe their personal level of job satisfaction, 50% of respondents reported being “very satisfied,” with another 38% categorizing themselves as “mostly satisfied, but wish some things were different.” One response captured the general sentiment quite well:

I do love aspects of my job, but the consistent duress and abuse we are forced to endure for very little pay is not worth the years it is taking off my life.

The 2020 election cycle had a clear impact on LEOs around the country, with 43% saying it “made me cherish my role in our democracy,” while 27% shared that “the stresses involved have forced me to consider another career.” Another 30% felt that it did not impact them either way.

Relatedly, our respondents identified a broad swath of sources from which they felt inappropriate or partisan pressure in 2020, including voters, party organizers, elected officials at all levels, co-workers, and even law enforcement.



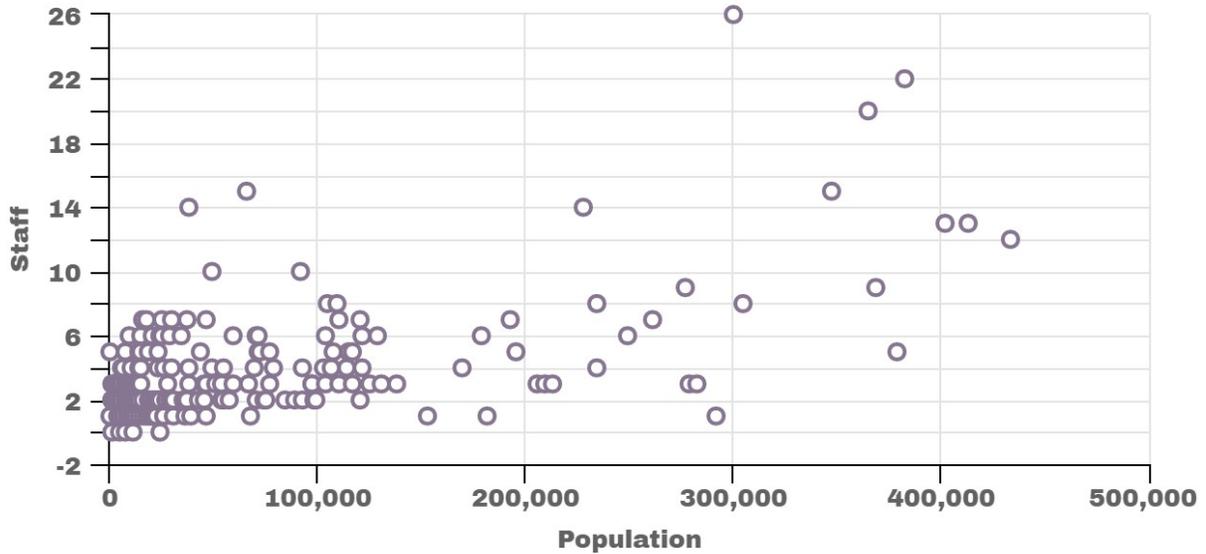
PREPAREDNESS & RESOURCES

The 2020 election cycle included more than just a general election in November, of course. 75% of our respondents administered three or more separate elections during the calendar year - meaning most of them could not begin fully preparing for November 3 until late summer. 85% of our LEOs, however, confirmed that this was enough time for proper preparations.

Unsurprisingly, staffing numbers correlate well with the size of a jurisdiction - but outliers do appear. Of our top ten most populated counties (avg pop: 854,163), five have at least 22 staff members, four have between 12-15, but one - Allen County, IN - has just five. Across our entire sample, 54% of LEOs report having enough full-time staff, with 46% saying they do not.

Nearly half of our respondents (44%) reported relying on volunteer staff for critical pre-election tasks and preparation.

Election office staff by population

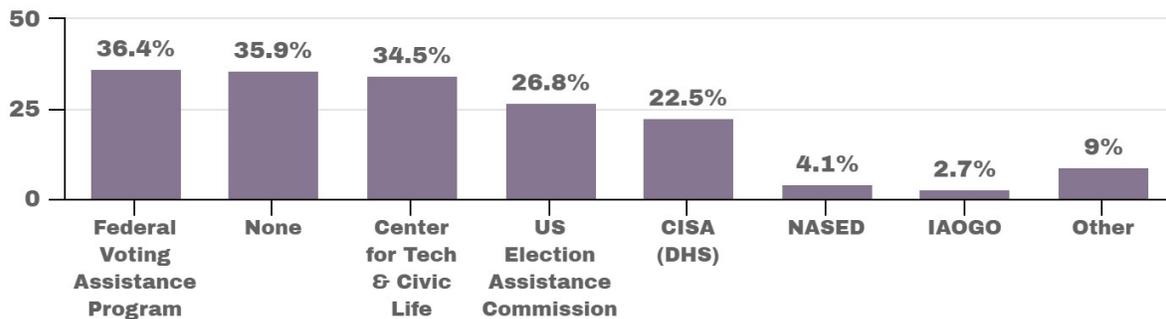


Note: jurisdictions with populations over 500,000 have been excluded from this visualization as outliers

LEOs cited a selection of professional organizations and support networks for resources, guidance, and training throughout the cycle. The most commonly cited groups include the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), the Center for Tech & Civic Life, the US Election Assistance Commission (EAC), and CISA/DHS.

Over a third of our respondents reported receiving *no* outside support.

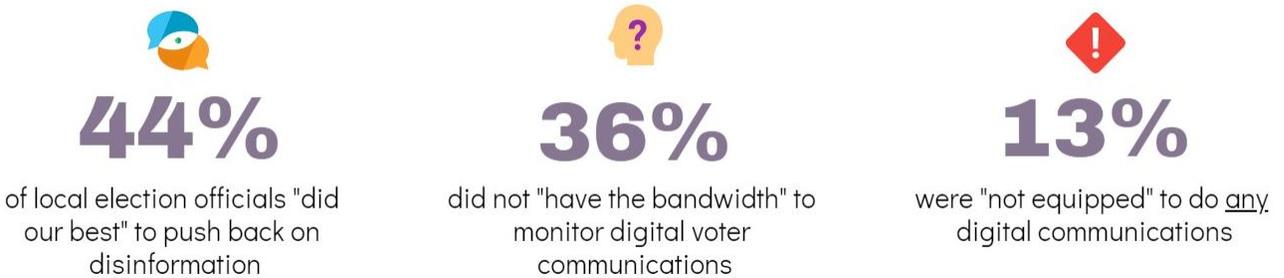
Sources of external support



VOTER COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Given the nature of the 2020 cycle, perhaps the least surprising of our results was that 73% of respondents reported receiving “far more” contact from the public.

A companion question attempted to evaluate the resources and support LEOs had when it came to handling the influx of public questions or concerns online: 47% said they “did their best to push back on online disinformation”, with 33% saying they “did not have the bandwidth” for proactive digital voter communications, and another 13% saying they were “not equipped to do any digital communications.”



We asked for details related to voter communications, and a common thread emerged from offices of all sizes:

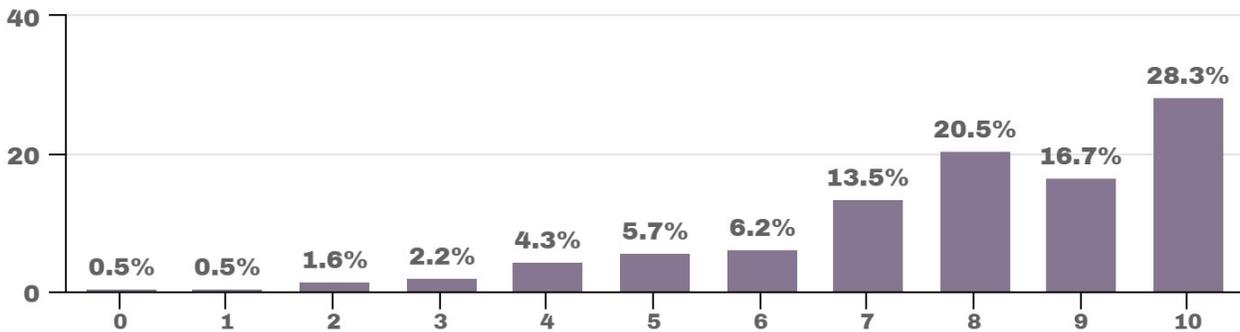


From both a quantitative and qualitative perspective, our local election officials clearly need help establishing and executing voter communications strategies for the digital age.

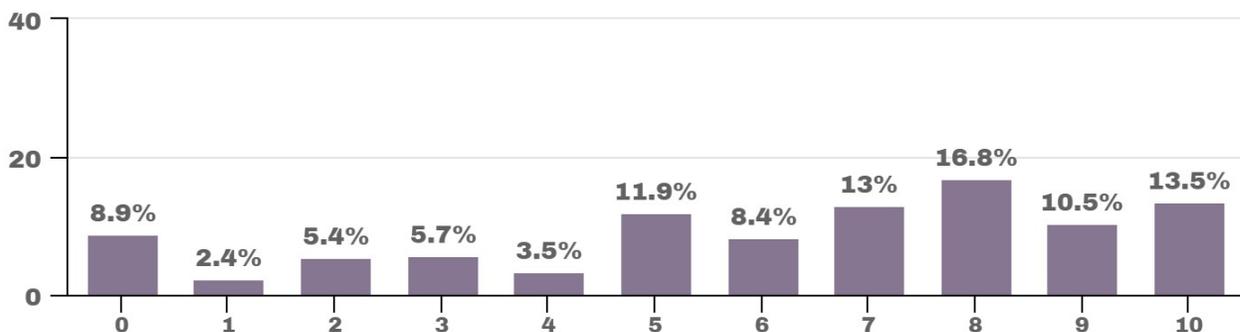
COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic cast its shadow across every facet of the 2020 cycle. We asked LEOs to rate the support they received from state and federal sources, respectively, on a scale of 0-10.

Effectiveness of state COVID-19 support



Effectiveness of federal COVID-19 support



We then drilled down to identify what kinds of support LEOs received. We found that simple supplies like PPE and cleaning products were generally well-distributed (96% and 90%, respectively, reported receiving enough of these), but more labor-intensive tasks like health and safety training (54%), recruiting new poll workers (45%), and obtaining resources/equipment for new polling places (30%) were not as well supported.

One apparent conclusion to draw is that we as a society delivered on commoditized materials like masks and hand sanitizer but failed to consider the importance of more strategic avenues of support and preparedness.

A final finding related to COVID-19: 69% of respondents reported that they were able to rely on their traditional and established voting locations, while 31% needed to identify "a few" or "many" new locations due to health and safety requirements.

MAIL-IN VOTING

Unsurprisingly, LEOs across the country were significantly impacted by the increase in mail-in voting in 2020. In jurisdictions without an established history of mail-in ballots, LEOs cited a variety of challenges: the need for public education, a lack of time and staff for processing ballots, burdensome state-level requirements, additional postage costs, and a shortage of necessary equipment.



Despite these hurdles, 92% of our respondents reported confidence that their state's mail-in voting procedures were "safe and secure." However, nearly half of them - 43% - confirmed a "significant increase in questions/concerns about the process".

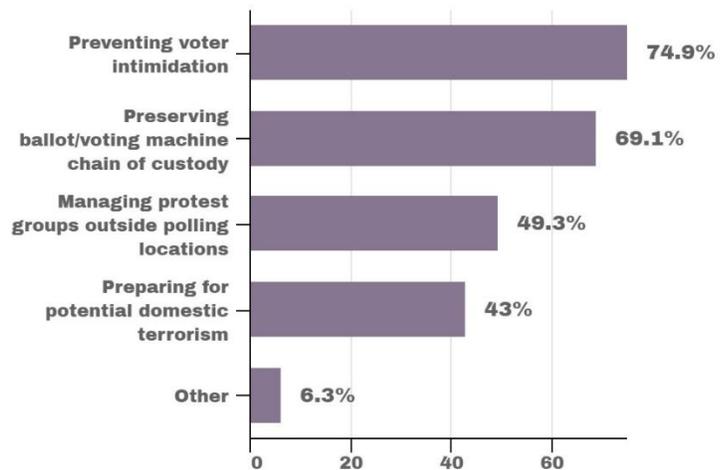
2020's unplanned experiment in expanded mail-in voting became a microcosm for the entire election administration experience: the end outcome was overwhelmingly positive at a macro-level, with boosted turnout and highly accurate results. But these changes took a personal and professional toll on the dedicated public servants who pulled it off.

ELECTION SECURITY

77% of our survey participants confirmed that security issues were a "larger focus in the 2020 cycle than in previous elections." 78% reported receiving cybersecurity training from state or federal agencies on a weekly or monthly basis as part of their preparations.

Only 57% of LEOs cited physical security - as opposed to cybersecurity - as a specific focus last year, with "preventing voter intimidation" and "ensuring chain of custody for voting machines and ballots" the primary areas of concern (75% and 69%, respectively). The "potential for domestic terrorism" was on the radar for 43% of these respondents.

Top physical security concerns



Of those who selected "other," ballot drop box security was a key issue.

In total, 96% of LEOs were confident in advance of the election that the voting process would be secure.

FUNDING

The perfect storm of conditions in 2020 demanded so much more of our LEOs, and additional funding was desperately needed in most jurisdictions. 54% of our survey respondents did report having a higher operating budget than in previous presidential-year cycles, with 44% sharing that their budget was "roughly the same."

Much of the budget support came from the emergency CARES Act legislation, as 75% of our participants confirmed receipt of at least some degree of funding through the federal program. Just 43% received grant money from non-governmental groups. It is worthwhile to note that both these pipelines represent ad hoc funding, as opposed to the more permanent approach of supporting local election offices through state budget processes.

Received CARES Act Funding



Received Private Grant Money



These results underscore two distinct questions moving forward: will private non-partisan grants remain available to LEOs? If so, are there ways to streamline processes to help LEOs apply for those grants?

The Arizona state legislature has already acted to [prohibit local officials from accepting private grant money](#) in the future and other state legislatures have proposed similar limitations.

Where private money does remain an option, our survey responses indicate that grant opportunities in general are not well-organized or proactively presented to LEOs, many of whom cited the time-intensive process as yet another demand on their overworked staff:



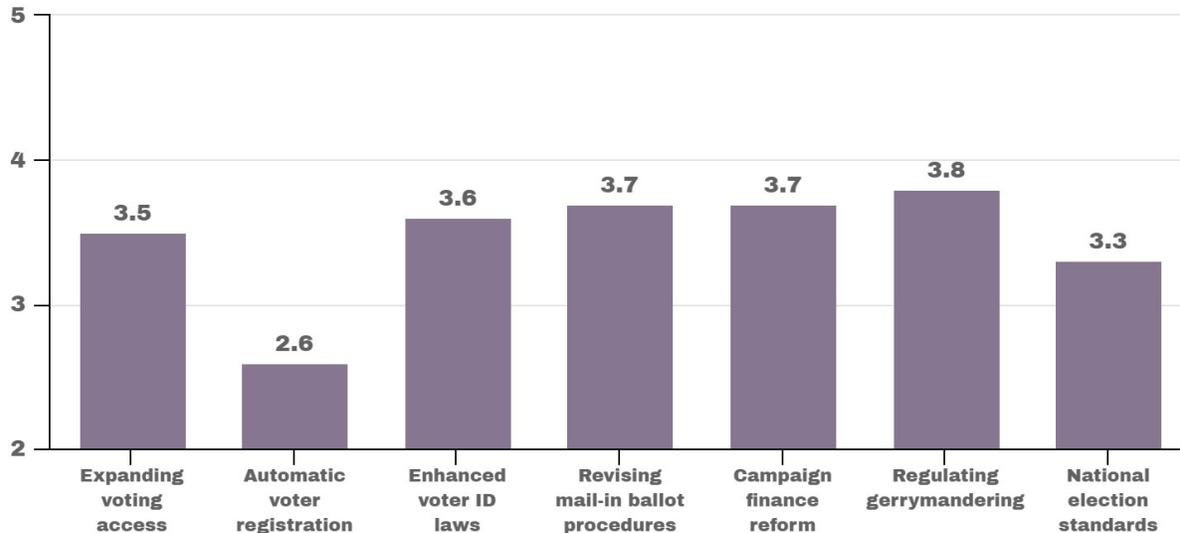
REFORM

We positioned our survey as a post-election look back at the 2020 experience, but also view LEOs as the most valuable voices we have when it comes to reforming the electoral system moving forward. 54% of our respondents believe issues with our democracy should be addressed via complementary reforms at the federal, state, *and* local levels. 29% believe all reform should come from the states, while just 8% believe the federal government should act alone in enacting change.

41% of our respondents "support some aspects" of the For the People Act (i.e., HR 1), and 13% "support it wholeheartedly". Another sizable cohort, 25%, reported being unfamiliar with the legislation and were uncomfortable weighing in.

Regarding specific proposals for reform, "regulating gerrymandering" received the most support from our participants, with "campaign finance reform" and "revising mail-in ballot procedures" close behind. "Automatic voter registration" as an area of reform received the least support from LEOs.

Support for reform measures



Average response when asked for support on a scale of 1-5

Our final point of order: 74% of LEOs believe there would be value in a national advocacy campaign supporting and unifying state and local election officials.

CONCLUSIONS

It doesn't take reams of survey data to look back at 2020 and conclude it was an election year that stretched our democracy thin. Our state and local election officials delivered [the safest and most secure election in American history](#), all while facing unprecedented conditions and unwarranted partisan pressure.

This survey data does, however, help to surface tangible takeaways from 2020 as viewed through the lens of local election administration:

- A significant subset of our local election offices need help navigating digital communications and engaging voters online.
- Local election offices would benefit from a national clearinghouse of private grant opportunities and would welcome assistance in pre-qualifying the most relevant for their needs.
- County-level election offices are eager for the chance to collaborate and coordinate across county and state lines.
- Our local election officials are increasingly frustrated by the national narrative and would welcome a proactive advocacy campaign designed to combat disinformation and educate the public.

This analysis is just one preparatory step in an effort that must not wane anytime soon if we expect our democracy, and the people who power it, to flourish. Pro-democracy voices of all shapes and sizes must come together to identify and execute proper solutions.

Protect Our Election is currently working to address all four of the above points. We're developing pro bono services and tools to assist with voter communications and grant application, and we're working directly with local election officials to build a movement designed to elevate civil servants everywhere.

Democracy is not dead yet. It just needs a little help.

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Inquiries about this survey and our future work may be addressed to our Executive Director, Steve Wanczyk, at steve@protectourelection.com.