



## Creating Professionalism in the Field

*Ernest Hawkins*

**Abstract** Election administration has and is changing as the process becomes more transparent and challenging. This case traces efforts made by a core group of individuals to professionalize election administration and create a professional curriculum for election administration. Also discussed is the connection between enhancing professionalism in the field and ensuring the necessary resources are provided to insure the integrity of elections in the United States.

**Keywords** Training • Education • Reform • Election • Professionalism

Election administration has changed since 2000, mostly for the good. From my vantage point of 35 years in the business of elections, my experience as a local election official for a large suburban county, and my service on national boards and commissions, I have observed some points about election administration that are important for those trying to understand the field (like members of the media and researchers) and for those working in it today.

---

E. Hawkins (✉)

Election Center, Sacramento County, Elk Grove, CA, USA

© The Author(s) 2019

M. Brown et al. (eds.), *The Future of Election Administration*, Elections, Voting, Technology, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18541-1\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18541-1_13)

As a starting point, people looking at elections need to understand that the field is detailed, complex and full of interlocking pieces. The inner workings of offices are complex, and the system across the country is even more so. And our lack of understanding is expensive, and so we should learn more. In the administration of elections, it is particularly important that the process is very transparent and that all of the stakeholders in the election process feel confident that the process is honest, fair and that every vote counts. For policy makers and for those involved in financial resource allocation, a thorough understanding of the details is required, so as to fund elections at an appropriate level to insure that the goals of an election are met.

When an election fails, for almost any reason, it is expensive. The cost of conducting the election over, taking appropriate actions, and restoring voter confidence sometimes requires major and expensive revisions to laws and process which usually exceed, by significant amounts, the cost of doing it correctly the first time. Thus, it is important to fund elections at an appropriate level.

Often a lack of education is named as the weak link in the voting process. Election administrators nationwide recruit and train well over a million poll workers for Election Day activities. For that reason alone, election administrators themselves need to be well trained.

Election administrator titles, responsibilities and salaries vary widely around the United States. Some administrators are only part-time while others carry more responsibilities than just administering elections. For example, the top election official in Los Angeles County California (a jurisdiction with over four million registered voters) is also the County Clerk and Recorder. In some jurisdictions the individual in charge of elections is elected while others are appointed. For those who are appointed, there are generally some specific education and/or experience requirements. Generally, education and/or experience are not required for those who are elected.

I was an appointed election official. I did have some limited election administrative knowledge. But “limited” is the key word. I was like a sponge trying to soak up knowledge about the responsibilities that I was about to perform. If a group of election folks were meeting anywhere in the country to discuss election processes, I wanted to be involved. I was lucky that I worked for a jurisdiction and for leadership that encouraged me to get training wherever I could. But in 1984 there wasn’t much.

Election administrators learned from one another, which, by the way, is still a major source of education.

In 1984, a group of election professionals and academics met informally to talk about some sort of formal professional education for election administrators. From these conversations, the Election Center was born and it is now in its 35th year. We partnered with Auburn University's Master of Public Administration in 1992 to develop formal, professional education for election administrators. Very specific requirements are needed to complete the course of study leading to a certificate in election administration called CERA (Certified Elections Registration Administrator). In 2017 the certification program graduated its 1000th student. To date, more than 30 courses have been developed and are taught through CERA, which is the only national certification program for election administrators, voter registrars, and vendors.

As one of the founders of the Election Center and the CERA program, I have been asked on numerous occasions to lecture, teach, testify, and consult on election administration and voter registration issues. During the 2000 presidential election and certification process, I was the Director of Elections in Sacramento, California, a jurisdiction at that time of about half a million registered voters. We used the now-infamous Votomatic voting system, which is essentially a punch-card voting machine. At the same time, I was the President of NACRC (National Association of Clerks, Recorders and Election Officials), then an affiliate of the NACo (National Association of Counties) and the co-chair of a task force purposed to reform the nation's elections. In those roles I was interviewed dozens of times on the role of election officials in the conduct of election administration (98 times by media from outside the Sacramento area).

On one notable occasions, I was asked to summarize these responsibilities at the Carter-Ford (former US Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford) hearings on election reform. The constraint of this interview was that I was to speak for exactly 45 minutes. Not 44 or 46. The hearing was being televised live.

First, I wrote a detailed description of my job, which in most parts was similar to or exactly what thousands of other election officials were doing leading up to Election Day, Election Day itself and following the election. I recorded my speech, even video-recorded it and practiced it over and over to get to exactly 45 minutes. My wife even timed me over and over again to be sure that it was precisely 45 minutes.

The day before the hearing I flew to Detroit, Michigan, and the morning of the hearing I drove to the Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Because a former President (Ford) was in attendance the Secret Service was well represented. As I approached the parking lot I was stopped and asked to identify myself. When I gave a Secret Service agent my name and purpose for being there I was told to get out of my car and report immediately to the hearing organizer. She told me that two Congressional members had taken longer than the time they were allocated and that she was forced to reduce my time to 20 minutes.

The Library was filled to capacity. The only place I could find to sit and reorganize my presentation was in the men's room. I found a "seat" and began the process of removing words, sentences and paragraphs from my prepared speech. It was now a jumbled mess!

As I was introduced, I began walking toward the speakers' table, and the organizer whispered to me as I passed by, "eight minutes, you only have eight minutes." Having no time to further reduce my prepared remarks, I calmly folded my prepared testimony and put it in my briefcase. When I got up to speak, I said: "Mr. President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Ernest Hawkins, I am the Registrar of Voters for Sacramento County California and I've been asked to outline for you the role of local election official's responsibilities in the conduct of elections. Here's what I do: Candidates and proponents of measures tell me that they want to be on the ballot. I gather up all of their requests, print up some ballots, secure some polling locations, hire some folks to work at the polls, collect the voted ballots, count them and announce the results. That's about it," I said. I then asked, "How could you possibly make this complicated, worse yet, screw it up?"

With that I sat down, followed by uproarious laughter, including that of President Ford. From all of the media coverage during the previous weeks most everyone in attendance was aware that elections were far more complicated than I had just summarized.

Several organizations, including the Carter-Ford Commission, went on to write reports suggesting how law and policy needed to change. The eventual outcome was Congressional legislation called The Help American Vote Act (HAVA), a bill that, among other things, created the Election Assistance Commission (EAC). The EAC was charged with the distribution of billions of dollars in Federal funds to modernize outdated voting equipment across the nation. In addition, the EAC was tasked with "helping America vote" by mandating that it help election administrators by

providing guidelines, checklists, “tool boxes” and other educational tools and aids. Many other provisions of the legislation were designed to help voters. In addition to the Federal funds that HAVA provided (the first in the history of the United States), the training and educational opportunities that were supported by those funds were the most significant, in my opinion.

In 2019, we see even greater need for more training in all areas of elections. With millions of individuals working on different parts of election operations, it is very important that everyone knows what they are doing. Election administrators have always suffered from a general lack of understanding among the public and policy makers about their responsibilities. Media attention has increased the public’s understanding, although sometimes that places election officials in a negative light. Following the 2000 presidential election there was extensive media exposure to some of the details, particularly the ballot count and certification process. “Chad” became a household word. The security of elections has become a common topic after the 2016 election as well as the hacking of databases, and other cyber problems. Training continues to be important because situations are constantly changing. One bad call by any of these million plus individuals can have a catastrophic result by creating widespread doubt about the integrity of the election process in America.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

