



FERNANDEZ ADVISORS

Assessment of Democracy Fund's Voter Centric Election Administration Portfolio

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Introduction

Democracy Fund contracted with Fernandez Advisors to evaluate the impact of Democracy Fund's Voter Centric Elections Administration (VCEA) portfolio in the context of ongoing and future challenges in the election administration field. This portfolio, which is part of Democracy Fund's Elections and Voting Program, seeks to 1) develop and integrate tools and best practices into election administrators' efforts, and 2) create and convene a national network of election officials. The findings from Fernandez Advisors' report are intended to inform Democracy Fund's ongoing planning process and priorities for future grantmaking and programming via the VCEA portfolio. The methodology used for this assessment can be found in the Appendix.

Executive Summary

In this assessment we describe recent changes to the field of election administration and how Democracy Fund has engaged the field through the VCEA portfolio. The assessment is informed throughout by the interviews we completed and our review of other research done on the election administration field. To facilitate open input from interviewees, they were allowed to comment without named attribution. To provide context for their comments, we use non-personally identifiable descriptors like the region of country that they are from and a basic job title (e.g., "election administrator for small city in the South").

We use a four step approach in this document which is summarized here.

First, we describe the transition to voter-centric elections that has been occurring since 2000, but with increasing speed in recent years.

Second, we explain how Democracy Fund built its VCEA portfolio in support of election officials immersed in this transition, the

portfolio's theories of change, and approaches to grantmaking.

Third, we describe the environment that has emerged during the period of VCEA portfolio investments, with a specific focus on:

- The expanding demands on election administrators due to: voter-centric changes like voting by mail and online voter registration; greater public communication responsibilities; changing state laws; as well as the need to adopt and manage new technologies.
- The increasing politicization of the field due to misinformation and disinformation, new laws that effectively question the accuracy of election administration and officials, physical threats, and a small number of election officials and candidates who openly undermine public trust in election administration.
- The training and tool adoption gaps that exist for elections officials. These gaps are present because of limits to the availability of affordable and accessible ongoing professional development as well as a lack of broad knowledge among all election officials about what resources and

¹The name of the website and associated emailed content is "electionline," however we have chosen throughout to italicize "*electionline*" to make it clear we are referring to this tool specifically and to address that this proper noun does not have its first letter capitalized even when it begins a sentence.

networks are available. The gaps also reflect differences in the needs between officials from jurisdictions of different sizes.

- The positive role that well managed state associations can have in helping to meet some of these professional development and networking gaps.
- The potential for threats to the independence of election officials because of eroding public confidence.

Fourth, we examine three categories of investments within the VCEA portfolio and how well these meet the needs of the election administration field in light of the environment that we have described. We look specifically at:

- Democracy Fund's convenings of leaders from state associations of local election officials.
- The *electionline* website and associated tools which are managed by Democracy Fund.
- Tools, training, and research that were supported via the portfolio.

² Drew Desilver, "Turnout soared in 2020 as nearly two-thirds of eligible U.S. voters cast ballots for president," <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/28/turnout-soared-in-2020-as-nearly-two-thirds-of-eligible-u-s-voters-cast-ballots-for-president/> (Accessed May 1, 2022).

³ Ibid.

⁴ National Conference of State Legislatures, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/early-voting-in-state-elections.aspx>. (Accessed February 17, 2022)

Transition in Elections & Democracy Fund Response

Voter-Centric Elections

Voter-centric changes in election administration to enhance voter access and convenience have been occurring at least since 2000 partially in response to the close presidential election that year revealing serious problems in election administration. Many interviewees pointed to an acceleration of innovations after the 2016 vote, due to concerns about the security of that election. Changes were then further expedited because of the need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. State officials rushed to address public health concerns and, in most states, wanted to make it easier for citizens to vote safely in whatever way they felt most comfortable.

In a testament to the importance of voter-centric policies, 2020 saw historic levels of voter turnout, with over 158 million voters casting their ballots² in the midst of the global pandemic. Over 66% of eligible Americans voted nationwide.³ Forty-four states now have early voting periods.⁴ Indeed, for the first time in 2020, more Americans voted early or by mail than voted on election day in person at their local precinct.



Interviewees described how voter-centric efforts, including extended vote by mail programs, expanded early voting periods, as well as increased use of vote centers and ballot drop boxes, all provided major improvements in voters' experiences. A uniquely high interest election combined with these changes to facilitate a greater voter turnout than at any time in over a century.

“Early voting... has been huge. We've allowed folks to vote early since 2006 – [and] clearly, it's made a difference to get people through the voting booth before election day. It was a huge transformative step for [our state]. We switched within sixty days to being 100% vote by mail – we had the infrastructure in place, election administrators knew how to do mail in voting. I can't imagine starting from scratch on vote by mail.”

— *Head of State Association
of Election Officials*

Many VCEA investments provided tools to election officials to assist with these positive changes. Interviewees cited the importance of VCEA supported initiatives to the daily work of election administrators.

“Election tools need to be voter-centric. A prime example of this is the Center for Tech and Civic Life tool to develop an election website, and then to see how it's in use. [CTCL says to administrators] 'Here's the thing, here's the steps of what to do with it and how much time you'll need to use it, and here's how it's in use in the field'.”

— *Consultant for Election Officials*

While there has been a broad expansion of voter-centric policies, they are not consistently applied. America has some 10,000 election jurisdictions with variation in rules across

states, creating a patchwork of election administrators, policies and practices. In addition, some states pass significant authority on election implementation to their counties and municipalities. This decentralization means elections look very different in communities around the nation and there is a lack of uniformity in support for election administrators. Interviewees also pointed out that there is variation in election officials' ability and willingness to implement voter-centric best practices.

Interviewees noted how voter-centric policies often start in one place and then expand broadly once they are proven effective. Colorado implemented a primarily vote by mail system in 2013. Other states have since followed suit by expanding options for voters to cast their ballots by mail, including by expanding eligibility for absentee voting. Elections in eight states are now fully vote by mail.

Vote centers are similarly in use in more places now.⁵ They allow voters to drop off their ballot on election day at any vote center in their jurisdiction rather than only at their specific polling precinct site.⁶ Some states allow the use of vote centers for early voting as well. This innovation expands access for voters whose work or other responsibilities may prevent them from voting at their local precinct on Election Day, as well as among voters who simply want more options. Additionally, the shifts to voting by mail, at drop boxes, or at voting centers, mean that online ballot tracking tools that allow voters to see where their ballot is in the acceptance and counting process have become popular as they provide greater transparency and assurance that one's vote is counted.

⁵ There is a body of scholarship on vote centers and their impacts. Robert Stein and Greg Vonnahme's research provided some of the earliest indications that "Election Day vote centers increase voter turnout generally, and among infrequent voters in particular." See: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1017/S0022381608080456>

⁶ Specific rules for the 18 states that currently allow for vote centers are available from the National Conference of State Legislatures, at <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vote-centers.aspx> (Accessed March 10, 2022).

Voter-centric practices, which are generally embraced by voters and were welcomed by election administrators interviewed for this analysis, require election officials and their staff to use new technologies, data tools, and management practices. In recent years, an election administrator's job has expanded to include cybersecurity, public relations, voter education, technology awareness, and public health. Interviewees think such changes are needed but acknowledge that they increase the complexity of the job and the demands on election administrators. They also noted that all of this comes with new financial costs.

There has not been a history of sustained federal funding for elections operations and equipment – instead funding has been inconsistent and often focused on a specific need, for example addressing pandemic relief or cybersecurity. The federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) included funding for state election infrastructure in 2002, 2018, 2020, and 2022, and the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and American Recovery and Rescue Plan Act have more recently included support for election administration, reflecting important but short-lived federal funding boosts. State support for election administration varies significantly by state and there is often a heavy reliance on local county or municipal government to foot the bill for changes in election policies passed by state government.

VCEA Portfolio

Democracy Fund recognized that voter-centric policies require greater capacity among election administrators and did not observe a clear pathway or infrastructure to build this capacity nationally. Thus, Democracy Fund sought to improve the methods, training, tools,

and systems used by election administrators.

Specifically, Democracy Fund had as its goals that:

1. States will adopt modern, voter-centric election systems and government will assume a primary role in registering voters, thereby improving the voter experience, reducing the risk of election failures, and easing the burden of registration.
2. Election administrators will adopt evidence-based best practices and technology to improve the voter experience and reduce the risk of election failures that undermine public trust.

To accomplish this, Democracy Fund created the Voter Centric Elections Administration portfolio via a vote of its board in 2017, with two tracks of work:

1. Develop and integrate high quality technology and tools into election administrators' management practices.
2. Create and support a network of election officials.

The VCEA portfolio was further refined to focus on two theories of change:

1. Supporting the professional development and training support needs of election administrators nationwide. This recognizes the gaps that exist in meeting these needs across the diversity of states and jurisdictions around the country.
2. Creating and convening a national network of election administrators who are leaders in their state associations of local election officials, where best practices in election administration could be highlighted and shared. This is rooted in the hypothesis that election administrators appreciate learning from and engaging with their peers, and that state associations are potentially

powerful vehicles to spread voter-centric information and best practices among local election officials simultaneously in multiple states.

In practice, Democracy Fund's VCEA portfolio advanced grantmaking approaches that supported:

- academic research into voter-centric elections practices and tools for administrators;
- nonprofit organizations developing and tailoring tools and practices with optimum usability for election officials, particularly at the local level;
- a network of election administrators who hold leadership positions in state associations of election officials to facilitate the dissemination of voter-centric elections tools and best practices in their associations and ultimately jurisdictions nationwide; and,
- *electionline*, an online tool that serves as "a source for politics-free news and information about the people and processes that guide our nation's elections."

Democracy Fund facilitates the first two of these approaches through grants and contracts. In the latter two, Democracy Fund owns and operates the resources directly.

The strategy for the VCEA portfolio was not initially created with a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens. Thus, this assessment does not seek to determine whether established DEI goals were met. Future strategy and research on election administration should consider how issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice impact this field.

Election Administration Environment

Increasing Demands on Election Administrators

The transition to voter-centric election administration has been a significant positive change for American democracy. In 2020, it facilitated historic voter turnout and made it easier to register and vote safely during the pandemic. In 2020, twenty-nine states significantly expanded their vote by mail, absentee voting, and early voting offerings.⁷

These revisions were driven by the emergency of the pandemic and thus while some states continue their voter-centric modifications, others are shifting back some portion of their election rule changes.

"Implementation of vote by mail and expansion of early voting was dramatic for my county – that's been quite a shift. This distributes the bell curve of labor across a longer period of time. It goes from one massive crunch week to a month— [which] makes it much easier to plan, [and] leads to a better quality of life for the election official."

— Election Official in Mid-Size Population County in Western State

These overwhelmingly positive changes come with new work for election administrators. The changing nature of election administration to incorporate technology and provide more voting options has resulted in an expanded set of responsibilities for election officials.

⁷ Brennan Center for Justice, 'Voting Laws Roundup 2020', <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2020-0>. (Accessed February 17, 2022).

Voter-centric digital tools such as e-poll books and online voter registration as well as voter roll databases could potentially be vulnerable to cyberattacks. In response, election administrators have needed to add cybersecurity to their list of core competencies. All of this necessitates choices in new tools, training, and management approaches.

"For election administrators, there's so much more complexity in administering elections. Election administration was pretty simple when technology was not really widely available for administering elections. [Now] you almost have to have an IT degree or background to successfully administer elections...Learning the IT stuff is a big hurdle for my folks."

— *Leader in State Association of Election Officials*

Election administrators have also needed to keep up with legislative changes, which can shift from one election cycle to another. Pandemic related changes in state voting laws meant many election workers needed to be trained in advance of the 2020 presidential election. Adding to the complexity, nineteen states that enacted laws incorporating voter-centric practices reversed at least some of those changes in 2021, with some state legislatures considering more anti-voter-centric proposals this year.⁸

"Now it feels like a tennis match, and we're stuck in the middle enacting laws, and [then] reverting back to what [the law] was before."

— *State Commissioner of Elections in Southern State*

Shifts in election administration and the need to implement these successfully present a challenge for many election administrators and their staff. While interviewees generally welcomed expanded voting options, they

pointed out that legislation mandating these changes often does not include sufficient additional funding for local administration. The tension between popular voter-centric laws and the lack of funding necessary to implement them was a consistent theme from interviewees. They expressed particular concern for smaller jurisdictions that often lack resources or access to larger municipal budgets.

Interviewees noted that election administrators also have expanded public engagement responsibilities. **These new demands result from multiple new realities, including:**

- Changes in rules about voter registration, voting by mail, and other voter-centric improvements require important efforts to educate the public through use of traditional and new media sources.
- Some jurisdictions have increased transparency with tools like publicly accessible cameras in ballot counting rooms or online ballot tracking for those who vote by mail or at a drop box. With increased transparency comes increased requests for information and greater accountability.
- Election administration has become highly politicized. This requires that election officials be able to engage effectively with the press and community to dispel misinformation and build public trust.

"For administrators, basic processes of the office are under more scrutiny, but not in a good faith way. There's an odd conundrum many of us face where we're grilled on how we run elections but not listened to when we explain."

— *County Election Official in Small to Mid-Size Population County in Midwestern State*

⁸ Brennan Center for Justice, 'Voting Laws Roundup: December 2021', <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-december-2021>. (Accessed February 17, 2022).

Politicization of Election Administration

Interviewees identified concerns in three broad areas where they felt that politicization was hurting election administration, and frustrating election officials:

1. Misinformation and disinformation undermine public confidence in elections and the administration of elections.
2. Election administrators are under constant pressure with increased public scrutiny, new laws targeting election officials, and some experiencing physical threats both online and in person.
3. A small number of election officials or candidates to be election officials are openly and intentionally undermining public trust.

Election officials interviewed cited the ongoing role that misinformation and disinformation play in their ability to do their jobs. They feel the need to spend much more time on dispelling inaccuracies.

“So many more people are weighing in on the administration of elections; to counteract that you have election officials trying to spout off all this information and facts, and I imagine it’s overwhelming.”

— Consultant for Election Officials

Unfortunately, misinformation is exacerbated by some elected officials who use it as justification for changes in state election laws. This makes it seem as if there was in fact something inappropriate that happened in the 2020 election that state legislatures are trying to fix. Two states went so far as to pass

laws in 2021 that provide for criminal penalties or other fines on election administrators for potential errors in election administration. More states are considering similar proposals in their legislatures this year.⁹ Interviewees noted that these kinds of laws have a chilling effect¹⁰ on election administrators who may otherwise have wanted to facilitate more voter-centric policies, but now act more timidly. Similarly, interviewees indicated that such laws can make already stressful election administrator jobs less appealing.

“Instead of doing our job of getting vote centers ready for the midterm elections - I’m reading bills [currently in the state legislature].”

— Election Official in Small to Mid-Size Population County in Southwestern State

In addition to spreading misinformation about the process of administering the 2020 election, a substantial number of people have gone further, threatening election officials around the country.

“Reuters has documented more than 850 threatening and hostile messages aimed at election officials and staff related to the 2020 election. [...] The messages spanned 30 jurisdictions in 16 states. They came via emails, voicemails, texts, letters and Internet posts.”

Some interviewees described the need for police protection, and others noted the reality that a small number of election administrators are now even facing recall elections – something generally unheard of previously.

“I’ve noticed an uptick in aggressive voters; it does seem like it’s increased ten-fold. It really started...when Trump started thinking he might be defeated.”

— Election Official in Mid-Size Population County in Western State

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-19/jail-threat-dangles-over-election-officials-in-new-gop-vote-laws> (Accessed May 1, 2022).

¹¹<https://graphics.reuters.com/USA-ELECTION/THREATS/mopanwmlkva/> (Accessed March 3, 2022).

Interviewees expressed apprehension about the recent phenomenon of a small number of people bringing misinformation directly to the job of being an election official. Interviewees raised concerns about candidates for secretary of state in Colorado and Michigan as well as the current Clerk of Mesa County, Colorado.¹²

While these officials and candidates remain exceptions rather than the norm, interviewees pointed to significant media coverage of this development and felt the prospect of political polarization among election officials imperiled the public perception of election administration as fair and nonpartisan in practice.

Election officials and experts interviewed cited politicization of the job, misinformation, and lack of support as reasons to leave the profession.

“There has been an attrition of unbelievable proportions in our industry—that’s knowledge, expertise, ... all gone. We are beat up, and people are leaving.”

— *Director of Elections in Small Population City in Southern State*

Others described this in much more personal terms. In some cases, their ire was directed at state legislators and officials who were willing to deny the results of a free and fair election.

“I’ve been doing this job for 18 years. I don’t want to do this job anymore. I’ve had it with them! They won’t listen, and obviously I’m not important! They don’t pay me enough to do this.”

— *Election Official in Small to Mid-Size Population County in Southwestern State*

Still others could not believe that misinformation was so effective, in light of all of the work they had done to run elections well in 2020 and previous cycles.

“It’s disheartening. I’m shocked that my friends who I grew up with believe that election officials are involved in some kind of fraud.”

— *Election Official in Small to Mid-Size Population County in Midwestern State*

The level of support for election administrators varies significantly from state to state and even across jurisdictions within states. Among interviewees, some feel greater support if they have a strong relationship with their secretary of state or governor’s office. Others pointed to the importance of their state association of local election officials in building a sense of community and support. Everyone interviewed described a belief that the varied threats to the impartiality of election administrators undermines public trust and ultimately the strength of our democracy.

¹² <https://www.denverpost.com/2022/01/18/tina-peters-mesa-county-sued-by-colorado-secretary-of-state-jena-griswold/> (Accessed February 7, 2022).

Challenges in the Development of Election Officials

Most interviewees cited the need for expanded training, professional development, and leadership support for election administrators so that they can effectively engage the changes that are happening in the field. Interviewees especially emphasized the need for training in public relations, information technology, cybersecurity, and higher-level database management – all of which are not traditional roles for most election officials.

“The idea that you're responsible for things you're not trained in, and that you don't have control over— that's changed for election administrators. The expectation of elections administrators are huge, and we don't have the skills or resources to know [how] to figure it out.”

— Director of Elections in Small Population City in Southern State

Interviewees indicated that meeting this need is hindered by:

- The highly decentralized nature of election administration.
- The costs associated with some important professional development opportunities.
- Differences in access to and quality of networks of election officials.
- Differences in capacity and needs of different size local election administration offices.
- The lack of a feedback loop in many states between local election officials and state officials.

There is no agreed upon standard for professional development curriculum or certification for elections administrators.

However, there is a well-respected Certified Elections Registration Administrator (CERA) certification through the Election Center, which was highlighted by several interviewees. Some interviewees noted that the cost of these programs can be a barrier to election administrators from smaller or less-resourced jurisdictions. Such jurisdictions often lack professional development budgets. An interviewee noted that The Election Center certification program includes in person convenings and costs \$699 (or \$499 for members of the Election Center). While this type of in person training and the associated networking were praised by interviewees, some noted the limiting nature of registration and associated travel costs. For context, one administrator from a mid-size county told us their annual professional development budget is just \$1500 for a staff of fifteen.

Seasoned administrators described leveraging their experience and professional networks to know what trainings and communications to access, as well as how and where to do so. But some pointed out the lack of clear approaches to orient new or less experienced administrators to the universe of information and training resources available.

I know from the state listserv [of election officials] that people don't know where to go to get the information. [My state] has a manual annually that walks through the A to Z of conducting elections and has an annual conference. Resources aren't listed for folks. I only know because I have been around for a while.

— Former Election Official, Large Population County in Southwestern State

While many election officials have embraced retraining and been successful in accessing professional development, others reported being left to their own devices to identify and access such opportunities. Interviewees with a strong state association recounted being able to find resources through their peers. Some

described reaching out to fellow members of their Elections Center training cohort to learn from colleagues in other states. Interviewees with access to Democracy Fund convenings of state associations point to the value of learning about innovations in these forums. Organizations such as Center for Tech and Civic Life and the Center for Civic Design, both grantees in the VCEA portfolio, provide resources and professional development support for local elections administrators as well. However, these organizations only reach a fraction of the over 10,000 election jurisdictions nationwide.

This is consistent with the Fors Marsh Group qualitative interviews of local election officials supported by Democracy Fund, which found that:

Nationally, LEOs [Local Election Officials] mentioned belonging to groups such as the Election Center, the International Association of Government Officials, task forces associated with the Center for Tech and Civic Life, the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center, and the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center. At the state level, LEOs frequently mentioned being members of professional organizations that more directly serve their role in local government (i.e., their state's Association of County Clerks and Election Authorities, their state's Township Association, and their state's Municipal Clerks Association). When probed on how LEOs find these organizations, the majority reported that they were expected to join state-level organizations and then subsequently learned about the national organizations through colleagues. Overall, LEOs reported finding a great deal of benefit from belonging to organizations at the state and national level. One LEO emphasized the types of support they receive from national organizations, saying "I get ideas for how other states do things, which is fantastic. I get a lot of the intangible, networking—meeting other people and being able to tap into knowledge/experience at a later time."

Other important existing national election administration resources are not oriented

towards local election jurisdictions. As one interviewee noted, national associations and networks such as the National Association of State Election Directors (NASSED), National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), and the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) are primarily focused on state-level officials, and in practice rarely reach local election administrators responsible for implementing elections.

About a quarter of interviewees for this assessment are election officials for small or medium size jurisdictions, providing a window into the challenges for these administrators. Interviewees pointed to addressing the unique needs of smaller and mid-size jurisdictions as important to the professionalization of election administration nationally. They identified the need for effective training that can reach frontline election administrators (in jurisdictions of all sizes). This requires developing dissemination strategies that can penetrate to the broad range of local jurisdictions to ensure they receive professional development.

Election officials from smaller jurisdictions often juggle additional responsibilities because they may serve as the one-stop drop-in in location for municipal permits, local assessments, and other services. Many interviewees identified concerns about a widening gap between smaller election jurisdictions and larger metropolitan areas which is further exacerbated by access to training.

"The big gaps [in the field] are around the capacity of smaller jurisdictions, and a lot of that is a resource gap and who can be attracted to work in those places and the supports available to do the work. People aren't quite as polished or trained, and because they have to be generalists, they have a hard time reaching a level of sophistication larger jurisdictions have."

– Political Science Professor, Specializing in Election Administration

The 2020 Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey of Local Election Officials indicates that a majority of election officials in large and small jurisdictions received both initial training and ongoing training.¹³ Initial trainings are often provided by states as a requirement for new election officials. The smaller jurisdiction respondents in the Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey were more likely to feel that the training that they received was “extremely” or “very effective,” when compared to officials working in larger jurisdictions. This may be a function of the typically greater work experience held by election officials from larger jurisdictions who may feel that available training is redundant.

A majority of voters are served by local election officials in jurisdictions with populations over 250,000, while 75% of local election offices serve just over 8% of American voters.

As Democracy Fund and Reed College have noted:¹⁴

- Fifty-eight percent of local election officials serve in jurisdictions of 5,000 or fewer voters.
- Twenty-seven percent serve in jurisdictions of 5,001 to 25,000 voters.
- Ten percent serve in jurisdictions of 25,001 to 75,000 voters.
- Six percent serve in jurisdictions of more than 75,000 voters.

It is not surprising that a significant portion of limited professional development resources provided by state government may be targeted towards and most useful for the

far more numerous smaller jurisdictions. States need to create a floor of knowledge and standards so that elections run smoothly across all jurisdictions.

Interviewees described the importance of getting the word out on professional development opportunities and finding ways to make them accessible to harder to reach and less resource rich election administrators. Some officials we interviewed applauded the greater availability of virtual trainings, which expanded during the pandemic. This allowed administrators from smaller, rural, or less-resourced jurisdictions to more easily and affordably access training, professional development, and best practices information.

It is important to find multiple ways to share information on upcoming opportunities to ensure that the broadest range of election administrators have access. One interviewee noted they learned of the Elections Center certification program from the only other person of color in their state association, rather than directly from their state association. It is unlikely that a one size fits all approach will work to ensure that training and professional development reach across the diversity of 10,000 election jurisdictions.

Finally, interviewees noted the lack of a feedback loop that allows for local election officials to share with state officials or nonprofit providers what is needed on the ground as well as what tools or trainings are working, and which are not. Similarly, this lack of a feedback loop is reflected in the lack of a voice in state legislatures for local election officials in some states.

¹³ Paul Gronke, Paul Manson, Jay Lee, and Heather Creek, “How Local Election Officials Trained for the Job, Ensured Cybersecurity, and Adapted to the Pandemic,” <https://democracyfund.org/idea/how-local-election-officials-trained-for-the-job-ensured-cybersecurity-and-adapted-to-the-pandemic/> (May 4, 2021).

¹⁴ Paul Gronke, Paul Manson, Jay Lee, and Heather Creek, “Amplifying the Perspectives of Officials at the Front Lines of Elections,” <https://democracyfund.org/idea/amplifying-the-perspectives-of-officials-at-the-front-lines-of-elections/> (April 19, 2021).

“Another gap is the capacity to solicit feedback about how things are going from election officials – to solicit, synthesize and then move on those recommendations. There is no feedback loop for local election officials at the forefront of a conversation to identify gaps. The field is missing a strong lobby of election officials influencing local, state, and federal decision making. . . . There is a real leadership gap in the field in terms of local election officials’ voices not being heard.

– Staff Member, Nonprofit Providing Technical Assistance to Election Officials

information across members, and most organize an annual conference.

“The majority participate in our County Clerks Association because it’s educational and we learn from each other. We have to maintain so much information for our jobs, you’d be silly not to go.”

— Election Official, Small Population County in Midwestern State

Interviewees underscored the diversity among state election official associations across the nation, noting that state associations do not all function as champions of innovation. A small number of interviewees pointed to concerns that political polarization is beginning to manifest in their state association conversations, with election officials’ differences emerging along partisan lines. They worried that this results in a less collegial discourse at the state association level. One interviewee perceived their state association as actively opposed to voter-centric practices, and specifically to expanding vote by mail options and vote centers. In this case, longstanding association members reportedly perceive changes to familiar election practices as too onerous. The same interviewee also pointed to challenging racial dynamics in their association, with a largely white membership seeking to bar administrators of color from participation in a key association committee.

Where there are no state associations, interviewees told us that election administrators demonstrate their resourcefulness by turning to other national or regional organizations such as the International Association of Government Officials (IGO) and the Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC) to find informal networks and other professional relationships. Interviewees used these connections for updates on how others

Benefits of Strong State Associations of Local Election Officials

Almost every state has a state association of election officials, though not all are equally active¹⁵ (and a few may be effectively dormant). Some states have more than one association because election roles may be bifurcated (for example a state may have an association of local county clerks and a separate one for registrars of voters – with both groups having oversight over different parts of the election process). Interviewees told us that election administrators generally take advantage of state associations when they are available.

Election officials interviewed believe peer learning and sharing occur via state associations, and the associations foster engagement on voter-centric tools and best practices. Where state associations exist, the majority of election administrators interviewed use them consistently to share information, troubleshoot challenges, digest legislative and policy developments, and commiserate. Nearly all associations referenced by interviewees have a listserv or other means of sharing

¹⁵ Electionline, “State Associations and Chief Election Officials,” <https://electionline.org/states/>; (Accessed February 19, 2022).

are implementing specific election programs, lessons learned from engaging in processes such as Risk-Limiting Audits (RLAs), and to solicit advice as they encounter challenges in implementing elections.

Many interviewees pointed to the added benefits evident when a state association is staffed, especially with an Executive Director. An interviewee identified that five states now have staffed state associations of election officials. Where present, professional state association staff can make connections between members as they encounter specific challenges, bring in experts and peers from other states to highlight best practices, and can serve as a strong advocacy voice for election administrators to state executives and legislatures.

Interviewees also noted the role of an effective state association in election officials' interactions with state government, whether with a secretary of state, governor's office, or state legislature. Where states lack a strong association, interviewees pointed to the dearth of a feedback loop between state policymakers and election administrators. The absence of a coordinated state association voice for local election officials can result in a weakened position vis-à-vis advocacy for reforms and funding. This has particular implications in the current environment where some state governments are increasing demands on local election officials without fully seeking their input or providing sufficient resources to effectively assist in meeting those demands.

Maintaining Independence

Multiple interviewees identified concerns about the need to maintain the independent and nonpartisan nature of election administration. They felt ongoing misinformation encourages the public and state legislatures to seek changes that diminish the independence of local election officials. Several cited as an example a new Georgia law that allows state officials to strip the power to run elections from local administrators.¹⁶ Interviewees suggested that a solution is to address the gaps in the public's understanding of how elections run and the role of local election officials. Their concerns were that the public is not aware of existing safeguards, the nonpartisan nature of election administration, and how difficult it is in practice to change the result of a national election in a country with some 10,000 local election jurisdictions.

"I don't know how [the erosion of confidence in election administration] isn't the number one concern of every election official."

– Leader in State Association of Election Officials

Interviewees were concerned that mainstream media was not doing enough to celebrate and explain the successful administration of the 2020 elections as a counterpoint to the misinformation and disinformation about election administration and administrators. The elections were quite secure and after numerous audits, it is clear they were also highly accurate. Additionally, they were the most democratic in our nation's history in terms of the percentage of the American people whose votes were counted. Some interviewees felt it was not worth it to wait any longer for American media to tell this story.

¹⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/georgia-gop-using-new-law-starts-push-take-over-local-n1275571>, (Accessed February 24, 2022).

Instead, they believe that there should be a proactive and ongoing effort to educate the public.

“We need money to get out there with commercials and radio ads to inform ... constituents, [so they] don't believe the lies.”

— Election Official in Small to Mid-Size Population County in Southwestern State

Some interviewees felt that there needs to be a national organizational voice speaking on behalf of local election officials. Such a voice would help educate the public and engage with local, state, and federal legislators and executive officers. A couple of interviewees thought that this role could be undertaken via the Democracy Fund convenings of state associations of election administrators.

“I underscore the need to address advocacy perspectives [at Democracy Fund State Association convenings]...We need to identify someone to serve as a national voice for local election officials.”

— Head of State Association of Election Officials

Democracy Fund Investments

Within the context of the changing election administration environment described in the prior section, we assess here the impacts of three categories of VCEA investments:

1. Convenings of State Associations
2. *electionline*
3. Tools, training, and research

In this section, we take each of these categories in turn. We describe what we learned from interviewees and from reviewing program related documents. We seek to answer to what extent these investments

address the needs of the field and the goals of the VCEA portfolio, as well as where improvements might be helpful and what gaps remain.

Convenings of State Association Leaders

Background on Convenings and State Participation

As part of the VCEA portfolio, Democracy Fund convenes leaders from state associations of local election officials from around the country. In building this national convening, Democracy Fund engaged with likely nonprofit organizations to assess their interest in creating and maintaining such a network. They were not successful in finding a partner interested in taking on this role. Thus, Democracy Fund decided to directly establish and manage a national network of leaders from state associations. After a mapping process and consultation with election experts, the first State Association convening occurred in 2018. Six convenings have occurred to date, with the most recent meetings being virtual given pandemic considerations.

These convenings combine information on tools for running an effective state association, voter-centric election best practices, introductions to nonprofit organizations that provide tools to election officials, and building stronger ties and networks among election officials. Attendance at the convenings is by invitation only. The convenings happen twice a year, in May and December. The states in attendance are quite diverse, with attendees from every region (with only Alaska and Hawaii notably absent from a regional perspective). There is no discernible political difference as both “red” and “blue” states are well represented.

While the convenings have a broad reach overall, states are not as consistent in repeat attendance. Most states had representation in at least one of the convenings, but only 4 states were represented consistently at all 6 convenings. This can impact the ability of the convenings to build on prior lessons learned and hinder ongoing networking and relationship building.

Number of states represented in at least one state association convening	27
Number of states represented in 2 or more convenings	20
Number of states represented in 4 or more convenings	10
Number of states represented at all 6 convenings	4

Also in attendance are academics working on relevant research and nonprofits that provide useful tools for running elections in a voter-centric fashion. This provides an opportunity for these groups to share their knowledge and resources with state association attendees. The agenda content of the meetings generally includes:

- Tools and techniques to assist in the effective administration of a state association.
- Tools and best practices in the administration of voter-centric elections.
- Working with other levels of government.

In our interviews with attendees, it is clear that at least as important as the formal agenda items is the ability to network. Attendees praised opportunities to build relationships with their peers from other states via informal networking sessions, dinners, and smaller breakout groups as one of the most valuable elements of their participation in Democracy Fund State Association meetings.

“It’s really rewarding knowing that I can help strengthen elections anywhere in the country. I’ve made good friends through these networks, and it’s so nice to see folks.”

— Election Official in Mid-Size Population County in Western State

The network provides relationships that benefit election administrators as they make decisions about technology, management strategies, and engaging with their own legislatures. The ability to seek advice and build upon the experience of peers from other states was repeatedly cited as a useful element of participating in the convenings. Multiple interviewees noted that they have maintained connections from the convenings and have called upon these relationships as they consider implementing new programs in their jurisdictions.

“When I go to the state legislature, I’m a lot more credible if I can say, ‘New Jersey did this, they tried and failed and here [are] the reasons why.’”

— Election Official in Mid-Size Population County in Western State

Participant Reactions to Convening Structure

The convenings' structure was well received among the interviewees who have attended, with praise for the clear content, attention to relationship building, introduction of new ideas, geographic diversity of states represented, and opportunities for bringing practices back to their states. In addition, the quality of meeting facilitation was highlighted.

“The content is always interactive and not very presentation-oriented and allows me to hear from other states. [These meetings] have allowed me to strategize with other states that are further along with legislative changes. The online meetings haven't filled in the gap of the in-person meetings.”

— Director of Elections in Small Population City in Southern State

In addition to our interviews of attendees, we reviewed the surveys completed by attendees for the convenings for which they were available. The surveys similarly give high marks from almost all participants. There were a small number of cases where attendees gave low marks. Unfortunately, they did not then provide comments in the surveys to explain what they did not like.

Beginning with the meeting in December of 2020, the convenings were moved to being fully remote due to pandemic safety concerns. While election administrators we interviewed understand why state association convenings became virtual, in their own work they have had to figure out how to operate safely in person when running elections. Many interviewees believe it should be possible to return to in person convenings.

“Anytime we can get people together face to face, we get much better information and opportunities to connect and share information among peers in informal and networking settings...Because election administration is the great lab of democracy in the states – being able to engage firsthand with others from other states and transplant their best practices to [our state] has been helpful.”

— Leader in State Association of Local Election Officials

Overall, interviewees felt that the in person convenings were better than the virtual ones and want Democracy Fund to figure out how to provide in-person programming safely. Given the high value that attendees put on the networking aspects of the convenings, it is not surprising that they were concerned about the loss of in person time.

“Previous in-person Democracy Fund State Association meetings have been some of the best meetings of my life – I have been able to bring back things to apply and see them in my jurisdictions.”

— Leader in State Association of Local Elected Officials

A feature of the convenings that was broadly praised is that Democracy Fund provides conference travel stipends for participants. Interviewees expressed that it is not common for these types of events for election staff to be free. This helps address interviewees concerns, which we described earlier, about how smaller jurisdictions or those lacking in professional development budgets are often left out of important opportunities to learn more about best practices and voter-centric improvements.

Participant Reactions to Convening Content

The convenings received high marks from different types of attendees for different reasons. Election officials tended to highlight the value of being in communication with their peers, and the opportunities to troubleshoot their unique problems, workshop ideas with colleagues and experts, and discuss innovations in a context of implementation. Experts associated with nonprofit organizations valued the ability to build relationships with their “core audiences,” election officials who could both benefit from and share the tools that the nonprofits have assembled. The convenings provide these nonprofits with the opportunity to share resources and market their efforts.



“Everybody tries to do it, but nobody does it like Democracy Fund. They provide connective tissue, know how to curate, and convene people, and it’s always very relevant. It’s not just another conference.”

– Professor, Specializes in Advising Jurisdictions on Overcoming Barriers in the Voting Process

Several lessons or tools highlighted at the convenings came up favorably multiple times among interviewees who attended. These can be divided into two categories:

- 1. Tools that help run a successful state association.** These included tools like “Conference in a Box” and “Unconference.”
- 2. Tools that help solve practical problems for election officials on the ground.** The University of Southern California’s ballot drop box siting tool and the Center for Civic Design’s tools for communicating with voters were given as examples of this. Election officials we interviewed appreciated those tools where it was

immediately clear how they could take them back to help solve problems in their own state.

When asked, interviewees generally want more of the same two categories of content in future meetings.

Some interviewees thought that Democracy Fund should consider how the convenings could tackle what they considered the need for a national voice speaking on behalf of local election officials.

Alternative Venues or Convenors

We queried interviewees about potential competitors or alternatives to the state association convenings, where state associations could build a similar network, learn from each other and experts in relevant fields, as well as be exposed to new voter-centric tools. Generally, interviewees do not believe that there is a similar, alternative, or competing venue. To the extent there are other opportunities, these were seen as complementary, and not as competitive or redundant.

One such complementary example that was noted is the federal Elections Assistance Commission’s Local Leadership Council, which started in June 2021. The Council serves as a national advisory board with two representatives from each state’s association of election officials. This board provides feedback and recommendations to the EAC on issues such as voter registration list management,

voting system user practices, election results certification, and other topics.¹⁷ Interviewees who are Local Leadership Council participants welcomed the creation of a direct line of regular feedback and communication between the EAC and local election administrators. However, these interviewees noted that the Council is not focused on creating a community of practice and learning among and for election administrators. It is instead a vehicle to help inform the EAC about how its resources should be refined to reflect how election administration topics and priorities manifest in the field. As such, it was not described as a replacement for the convenings held by Democracy Fund.

electionline

Background on *electionline*

electionline is a website designed to be useful for election officials, researchers, and organizations that provide training, advocacy, and funding in support of secure, modern, and voter-centric elections. *electionline* includes:

- a daily summary of election news articles aggregated by state that is emailed daily to those who sign up for it on the website
- “*electionline* Weekly” which elevates key current issues, research, and initiatives relevant to election administration, which also is sent via email to those who sign up for it on the website
- a jobs listing
- a searchable list of state associations of election officials and the chief election officials for each state
- a searchable compendium of trainings and resources

- an election calendar and list of upcoming events
- links to other useful tools

Democracy Fund formally acquired *electionline* in 2017. Prior to that, *electionline* had been affiliated with the University of Richmond, Pew Charitable Trusts, and Democracy Works. When Pew’s strategic direction changed, *electionline* no longer had a stable funding stream. Democracy Fund heard from election administration practitioners that the closing of *electionline* would be detrimental as it is an important source of information. After efforts to find other hosts were unsuccessful, Democracy Fund decided to acquire and host *electionline*, which is now part of its VCEA portfolio.

“I look at it weekly, my staff looks at it daily. It’s the easiest way to get information on a state by state basis. *electionline* weekly is ... highly read in the field, we use it to get our reports out there.”

— Head of Election Initiatives at National Nonprofit Policy Organization

Reactions to *electionline*

By far interviewees cited the daily and weekly email updates as the features they use most in *electionline*. This was true for both election officials and for staff from nonprofits. Users can sign up to receive both email updates on the *electionline* website. Many interviewees noted it was the first thing they read every day, relying upon the convenience of the daily news clips landing in their email inboxes. Interviewees appreciated the clippings’ brevity as reflective of election administrators’ time constraints and their need for “bite-size” information.

“I read it daily. It’s one of the first emails I read in the morning.”

— Election Official in Mid-Size Population County in Western State

¹⁷ Election Assistance Commission website, <https://www.eac.gov/about-eac/local-leadership-council>, (Accessed February 10, 2022).

“I open it every day, look for information on tools, and then share with my colleagues on Slack.”

– Head of Local Government Engagement for National Nonprofit Voting Tools and Training Provider

Nonprofit staff noted that *electionline* allows them to quickly get a sense of what is happening nationwide, while also allowing them to dig deeper on an issue that affects a small number of states. The aggregation of content by state and ability to search by state were also cited as useful.

“electionline weekly is [my] bread and butter - it's critical to what I do. It's key to knowing what's going on and to hear what's going on in other states. I've used electionline clips to inform my outreach to other states.”

– Senior Manager, Nonprofit Providing Technical Assistance to Election Officials

Frankly, there was much less attention given to other aspects of *electionline*. Interviewees did not discuss using *electionline* for job searches or postings or to find available trainings, and many did not know about the other resources available on the website. The daily and weekly emails were identified as very useful and for many interviewees these emails are what they know of *electionline*.

“It helps the good ideas spread.”

— County Election Official in Small to Mid-Size Population County in Midwestern State

While *electionline* was highly praised by most interviewees, some did not believe that everyone is aware of *electionline*. Interviewees felt that this is especially true for administrators from small-to-medium-size jurisdictions. This may reflect the broader challenges of voter-centric election best practices and innovations penetrating to local administrators in smaller jurisdictions. Specifically, those with less

access to existing professional networks may simply have fewer people recommending the tool. And some state associations may not be aggressively marketing *electionline* to their members through actions like adding it to their website and directly and regularly recommending it. Finally, as identified in the Reed College/Democracy Fund Survey of Local Election Officials, and noted previously in this assessment, local election officials from smaller jurisdictions may have significant other non-election duties. Thus, they may not see themselves primarily as election officials and seek out election specific resources like *electionline*.

“I wish electionline was ours! It's a hugely valuable communication tool to reach large numbers of election officials....It does election clips in a way that's easily consumable for election administrators and the general public. I like to scan the news highlights to identify and monitor trends and shifts.”

— Federal Official Working on Improving Election Administration

Strengths and Weaknesses of *electionline* Website

Interviewees perceive *electionline* as well run, effective in its use of technology, and easily accessible. Some also perceive that Democracy Fund has the resources to ensure that *electionline* continues as an important and solid piece of infrastructure for the field. In assessments over the years, we have reviewed incidences where a foundation takes on responsibility (whether as a donor or operator) for a core piece of field infrastructure. This might include tools like a widely used database of voters or grassroots organizing instruments. In these situations, we often find that for both other funders and for the broader field, the assumption is that the foundation will continue maintaining the core infrastructure indefinitely.

A foundation's financial support and oversight can help make the infrastructure more reliable, and thus more heavily used. Paradoxically, this can make it uniquely difficult for a foundation to exit such a role once it takes it on.

We spent several hours using the *electionline* website with an eye towards its usability and usefulness. While we are not election officials, we are like many other users of *electionline*, professionals who work extensively in the election field. We often engage with election officials and nonprofit organizations working on election issues. **With that background, we found the following:**

- The “Daily News” and “*electionline* weekly” sections are impressive resources that accumulate useful information and provide a weekly analysis. Both are unique and provided in an easy to understand way. We agree with interviewees that these are valuable tools that are widely used.
- The “Elections Calendar” section is helpful but may have a small audience who want to see primary election dates (and primary runoff dates where required) for all states in one place. Google and other search engines make it easy to find this information for any one state. This information is also available online from the Federal Voting Assistance Program and other sources (all of which are easy to find using Google).
- The Events section only had 3 events listed when accessed in February 2022. Thus, this does not appear to be a meaningfully comprehensive list of events relevant to election administrators or nonprofits working on elections.
- The “State Associations” section includes lists of associations of election officials by state with links to their websites. This could be especially useful for new election officials, or for nonprofits looking to outreach to election officials. It is well

organized and easy to understand.

- The “Training and Resources” section is well populated with relevant content. However, we found it not particularly easy to use. Examples of why include:
 - There is no filter for training. Thus, anyone looking for trainings would need to read through lots of content they are not interested in.
 - To resolve this, we searched for the word “training” using the search function on a Chrome browser. This turned up 8 trainings, but whenever we used the search function, we found that all the buttons on the website became inactive so we could not click through to see the training (or do anything else as the website effectively stopped working and needed to be reloaded). While this can be quickly fixed, it suggests the need for ongoing testing and site maintenance.
 - The resources available are strong but the tool to sort through them is a bit clunky. There may be value in refreshing this with an expert in user experience and user interface.
- The “Jobs & Marketplace” section provides a place for website users to post their job openings and to offer up used election equipment for sale. When accessed on February 23, 2022, we found 26 jobs posted and no postings for election equipment. The tool looks well organized and makes it easy to click through to the poster's website to learn more. The only issue here is its limited use. This is likely because local governments have legal job posting requirements and other online job marketplaces reach much larger audiences. For example, a search in March 2022 of the term “election official” on Indeed.com returned 1,076 relevant job postings.

Tools, Training, and Research

In our interviews, we sought to understand what election tools, trainings, research, and other resources are most valuable and why. In this sub-section we review how well the VCEA portfolio's investments match with what interviewees told us is needed and the emerging environment for local election officials.

Generally, interviewees want tools (trainings, technical assistance, technologies, etc.) to be (1) informed by the needs of local election officials, (2) problem-solving and practical on the ground, and (3) supported by good research and where possible testing in a small number of locations before they are released to a broader audience of election jurisdictions. This is generally consistent with many of the investments made in the VCEA portfolio.

Indeed, a review of the portfolio indicates that it has already sought to meet many of the needs and gaps articulated in our qualitative assessment. The chart on the following page identifies some key needs discussed in previous sections and VCEA grantees or contracts that address each.



Key Needs	VCEA Portfolio Investments
Lack of a feedback loop for local election officials to identify gaps and inform trainings and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democracy Fund/EVIC Reed College survey of local election officials • Fors Marsh Group qualitative interview research of election officials
Training and Technical Assistance for Election Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Center for Tech and Civic Life which provides online course offerings and functional tools for election officials to assess and administer elections • Center for Civic Design for technical assistance on various voter-centric design issues
Tools to solve real world on the ground problems faced by election officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USC California Center for Inclusive Democracy to help election officials identify where to locate polling places and ballot drop boxes • Center for Civic Design to provide various best practice election design tools, including envelopes for mail-in ballots • <i>electionline</i> (previously funded through a grant to democracy works) for the daily and weekly updates meant primarily for election officials and those supporting election officials • Democracy Works' Ballot Scout and Voting Information Project tools • Tools associated with University of Rhode Island's RI VOTES • National States Geographic Information Council's Geo-Enabled Elections project
Supporting State Associations of Election Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation and hosting of convenings of state association leaders
Need for public education on how elections work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arch + Bow Productions to create documentary on how public servants successfully administered the 2020 election

We find that these investments are consistent with the kinds of tools that interviewees feel bring the most value. We do note that it is important that for any of these tools to have the most impact that they be broadly accessible. Interviewees identified that some of the best tools are not necessarily well known among election officials and not every state has a high performing state association to serve as a vehicle to share tools. As we have noted previously, some strong resources including in person trainings and certifications may have high costs that limit participation. Addressing issues of accessibility is important in ensuring that these types of tools are having maximum positive impact on the adoption of voter-centric election administration. Similarly, finding ways to systematically get the word out about best practices and tools can have positive impacts.

“After [attending] the State Association convening, I got invited to present to the Illinois State Association...[it was] a chance to provide some comparative perspective on how other states measure up.”

– Engineering Professor, Specializes in Overcoming Barriers in the Voting Process

We do want to highlight two VCEA grantees that were consistently referenced positively during our interviews as exemplars of important parts of the voter-centric infrastructure that solve real problems for election administrators on the ground.

These include:

- The Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL)
- The Center for Civic Design (CCD)

“The Center for Civic Design was introduced to me by Democracy Fund, and I introduced them to our Secretary of State to redesign many [of our state election] forms. The error rate on [our vote by mail] application was cut by 50-60% after the Center for Civic Design and our Secretary of State started collaborating. More people had their votes counted because of that work.”

– Leader in State Association of Election Officials in Midwestern State

We did not ask about CTCL or CCD directly, thus that they were raised by multiple interviewees speaks to their impact. It also likely speaks to the ways in which they regularly engage with local election officials and their presence in Democracy Fund convenings of state associations.

This assessment focused primarily on how election officials and those working closely with election officials perceived the field. Thus, much of our analysis on grants reflects the needs identified by these interviewees. The VCEA portfolio includes other grants that inform other audiences about the needs of election officials, identify trends, and conduct research that is useful for policymakers as they consider changes to election laws. **Examples of these types of grants include:**

- A grant to the Marshall-Wythe School of Law Foundation to create online tools for use by judges and journalists as they review election law related cases.
- A grant to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to support an Election and Data Science Lab for purposes of elevating web based tools and data sets for use by academics and to support building a network of election science scholars.
- A grant to the National Conference of State Legislatures to provide information

and support to state legislators and staff members working on redistricting and voter access issues.

- A grant to the Native American Rights Fund to support fostering of partnerships with the United States Postal Service to address reality that on many Native American reservations voting by mail is hindered by the lack of traditional mailing addresses.

All these grants almost certainly have relevance to making sure that elections are administered in a more voter-centric way. However, they would generally be outside the experience of most people interviewed for our analysis.

We want to note one additional finding regarding the use and adoption of high quality tools by local election officials. In interviews for this assessment and dozens of interviews of elections officials that we completed for other research we did on the 2020 elections, interviewees highlighted the role that technical assistance providers can wind up playing in addressing middle and upper management staffing gaps in local election offices. As well, we heard from technical assistance providers that in addition to making recommendations on tools, they often get pulled in to support nuts and bolts operations, including items like procurement, public relations/education, technology integration, and ballot design. This likely reflects that great new tools alone are not enough. For many jurisdictions, there is a need for support in the form of experienced managers who can help implement the tools.

Conclusion

Democracy Fund's VCEA portfolio was developed to respond to and encourage a significant change in election administration — the transition to more voter-centric elections. This response required addressing the significant differences in both election administration across states and capacities of jurisdictions. Democracy Fund chose a set of tools, networks, research, and providers to help build capacity in the field, relying on existing infrastructure as well as new technologies and techniques. These choices largely appear well considered. They provided positive impact and offer the opportunity to better understand the needs of the field going forward.

At the same time, additional forces began to act on election administration. Some of those were unanticipated, like the pandemic. Others like misinformation have been simmering for years and threaten the independence of election officials.

Funders, when considering next steps for investing in a strong system of election administration, must decide how to balance a variety of demands. Investments in building the capacity of election administrators and their offices remain worthwhile. Their training, network building, access to new tools and voter centric initiatives, all with a commitment to impartiality, are at the core of safe and modern elections. The three funding streams of supporting state associations, *electionline*, and tools, training, and research, continue to be wise investments.

However, as reflected in our recommendations, these investments may need to be tweaked and expanded to address lessons learned and ongoing changes in the field. Funders should consider how to balance strengthening existing work with potentially adding new attention to topics like tackling politicization and building public communication capacity in support of integrity in election administration.

Appendix

Methodology

Fernandez Advisors combined a review of existing portfolio research and documentation, meetings with Democracy Fund staff, and interviews with stakeholders to create this qualitative analysis. Fernandez Advisors joined a session convened by Democracy Fund staff in October 2021 that outlined the history of the VCEA portfolio, and the core issues Democracy Fund sought to address via its VCEA grantmaking. Fernandez Advisors reviewed a background memo prepared by Democracy Fund staff on the goals and evolution of the VCEA portfolio and examined portfolio grants and contracts. Fernandez Advisors also reviewed a qualitative interview analysis of local election officials prepared by Fors Marsh Group and a national survey of local election officials conducted by the Elections & Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed College in partnership with Democracy Fund.

For the interview portion of this assessment, Democracy Fund staff worked with Fernandez Advisors to identify interviewees. From December 2021 through February 2022, Fernandez Advisors completed interviews with 25 election officials, academics, and leaders from nonprofits, including current and former grantees of Democracy Fund’s VCEA portfolio.

Local Election Officials	Leaders from State Associations of Local Election Officials	State Election Officials	Federal Official	Nonprofit providers, partners, and academics
10	3	1	1	10

We sought interviewees’ assessment of: the election administration landscape; current and future training and professional development needs of election officials; the availability of resources for these practitioners; and issues to consider as Democracy Fund defines future grantmaking priorities for the VCEA portfolio. Fernandez Advisors also reviewed documents prepared by Democracy Fund staff on convenings of state association meetings. Finally, to facilitate our understanding of Democracy Fund’s *electionline* website, Fernandez Advisors signed up for emails from *electionline* and reviewed the website.