The First Comprehensive Assessment of Election Administration Across the Nation

Since the hotly disputed 2000 presidential election, interest in how states administer elections has greatly intensified. The U.S. election system works best when all eligible voters can cast a ballot conveniently and when those ballots are counted accurately and fairly. Whether those criteria are being met has been the subject of considerable debate—too often based on anecdotes rather than on evidence.

A number of government agencies gather data on aspects of election administration, but never before has this information been collected and analyzed comprehensively to measure the performance of election administration systems across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

To fill this need, the Pew Center on the States developed the first Elections Performance Index (EPI). This online, interactive tool uses 17 indicators (see sidebar) to summarize election administration policies and practices across all states and over time. Pew partnered with Charles Stewart III, professor of political science at the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology, to bring together an advisory group of leading state and local election officials and academics to select and validate the measurable indicators and data sources.

The index currently covers the 2008 and 2010 election cycles and will be updated as complete data become available after each election. Percentages for each state are shown for every indicator, and are averaged to provide an overview of a state's overall performance.

The EPI builds a new baseline for measuring election administration and helps policymakers, election administrators, and other citizens:

- **Evaluate elections based on data** and not just anecdotes.
- **Compare overall and indicator-specific performance** across states.
- **Measure the impact of changes** in policy or practice over time.
- **Reveal trends** that otherwise might not be identified.
- **Encourage better data collection and further research** into how elections are run.

Key Findings, State Election Performance 2008–2010

High performers: Colorado, Delaware, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin were among the highest-performing states during both the 2008 and 2010 election cycles.

Low performers: Alabama, California, Mississippi, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia were among the lowest-performing states in the 2008 and 2010 election cycles.

Availability of voter information lookup tools. Eight states (Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Wisconsin) had all possible voter lookup tools available online in 2008 and 2010, and two states (California and Vermont) provided none.

THE INDICATORS

The Election Performance Index's 17 indicators track key measures of administration effectiveness with a specific focus on the prevalence of those problems voters most frequently cite as the reason for not casting a ballot.

1. **Absentee Ballots Rejected:** What percentage of absentee ballots were not counted out of all ballots cast?

2. **Absentee Ballots Unreturned:** What percentage of absentee ballots sent out by the state were not returned?

3. **Data Completeness:** How many jurisdictions reported statistics on the 18 core survey items in the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's Election Administration and Voting Survey?

4. **Disability- or Illness-Related Voting Problems:** What percentage of voters did not cast a ballot due to an "illness or disability (own or family's)"?

5. **Military and Overseas Ballots Rejected:** What percentage of military and overseas ballots returned by voters were not counted?

6. **Military and Overseas Ballots Unreturned:** What percentage of military and overseas ballots sent out by the state were not returned?

7. **Online Registration Available:** Were voters allowed to submit new registration applications online?

8. **Post-Election Audit Required:** Was a voting equipment performance check required after each election?

Voting wait time. The two states with the longest average wait times to vote in 2008 were South Carolina, at just over an hour, and Georgia, at more than 37 minutes. The 10 states with the shortest times had waits on average of fewer than six minutes.

Disability- or illness-related voting problems. The two states with among the lowest rates of nonvoting due to illness or disability were Oregon and Washington. These are the only two states that conducted the 2008 and 2010 elections almost exclusively by mail.

Data completeness. States' completeness in gathering and reporting data increased overall from 2008 to 2010. The number of states with 100 percent completeness rose from seven to 14, and the number with 90 percent or more rose from 29 to 38—both including the District of Columbia.

Availability of online registration. The number of states that made available online voter registration increased from two in 2008 to eight in 2010.

Registration or absentee ballot problems. Six of the 10 states with the lowest rates of nonvoting due to registration problems— Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, and Wisconsin—have allowed Election Day registration for at least two decades (North Dakota does not require voter registration).

The field of election administration is constantly changing, and the index will evolve with it. Pew welcomes feedback on how to refine and make use of the EPI as a tool in ensuring an accurate, cost-effective, convenient, and secure election process in every state.

9. **Provisional Ballots Cast:** What percentage of all voters had to cast a provisional ballot on Election Day?

10. **Provisional Ballots Rejected:** What percentage of provisional ballots were not counted out of all ballots cast?

11. **Registration or Absentee Ballot Problems:** How many people reported not casting a ballot because of "registration problems," including not receiving an absentee ballot or not being registered in the appropriate location?

12. **Registrations Rejected:** What proportion of submitted registration applications were rejected for any reason?
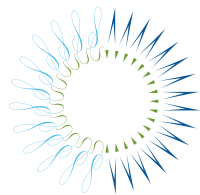
13. **Turnout:** What percentage of the voting-eligible population cast ballots?

14. **Voter Registration Rate:** What percentage of the voting-eligible population was registered to vote?

15. **Voting Information Look-Up Tools:** Did the state offer basic, easy-to-find, online tools so voters could look up their registration status, find their polling place, get specific ballot information, track absentee ballots, and check the status of provisional ballots?

16. **Voting Technology Accuracy:** What percentage of the ballots cast contained an under-vote (i.e., no vote) or an over-vote (i.e., more than one candidate marked in a single-winner race)— indicating either voting machine malfunction or voter confusion?

17. **Voting Wait Time:** How long, on average, did voters wait to cast their ballots?

THE **PEW**

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