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"I'll Wear a Bulletproof Vest to Work": State Centralization and Local Election Officials' Resilience to the Big Lie

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Abstract

This thesis examines how misinformation, incendiary rhetoric, and conspiracy theories that Donald Trump was the rightful winner of the 2020 presidential election — the "Big Lie" — have affected local election officials' ability to conduct free and fair elections. This is a study of how the assault and harassment of local election officials, motivated by the Big Lie, have impacted their ability to retain staff and recruit new staff. Additionally, this thesis considers the highly decentralized nature of election administration across all fifty states. Some states have centralized election laws and administration at the state level while other, decentralized, states' election administration varies from county to county or even township to township. The four states investigated range from highly decentralized to highly centralized. The metrics I use to determine state centralization are 1) what election costs do the states pay for 2) what type of training for election officials does the state require, and 3) are there uniform voting and voter registration procedures across the state? This study examines whether the level of centralization impacts local election officials' resiliency amid increasing election denialism and threats to electoral integrity.

Introduction

"There is nowhere I feel safe. Nowhere. Do you know how it feels to have the President of the United States target you?" said former Fulton County, Georgia election official Ruby Freeman in a prerecorded video to the U.S. House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack (Amiri 2022). Freeman, and her daughter Wandrea "Shaye" Moss, were accused by President Donald Trump of bringing in suitcases of fraudulent ballots with votes for then Presidential candidate Joseph Biden and scanning them multiple times on the voting tabulator machines. They were also accused of passing around a USB memory stick that contained a fraudulent vote count (Gardner 2022). Unsatisfied by the results of the 2020 election, President Trump turned to attack Freeman and Moss for rigging the election. As a result, Moss and Freeman, both Black, were confronted by a slew of violent, angry, and deeply racist threats. "A lot of threats, wishing death upon me. Telling me I'll be in jail with my mother. Saying things like be glad it's 2020 and not 1920," said Moss (Amiri 2022). Rudy Giuliani, then President Trump's top campaign lawyer, said that Moss and Freeman were passing around the USB memory stick like a vial of heroin or cocaine. Freeman was passing Moss a ginger mint (Gardner 2022). Trump supporters began to come to their homes, screaming at them from the outside, attempting to enter the homes to search for fraudulent ballots, and even trying to make citizen arrests. Their lives were turned upside down. Neither of them stayed on staff and all the other permanent election officials and supervisors that were shown on the video that Trump used as "evidence" of his accusations against Moss and Freeman have quit (Amiri 2022).

The experience of Moss and Freeman, however, is not out of the ordinary for election officials across the country. Their case exemplifies the changing narrative against election officials, and that a large part of Trump's supporter base believes these conspiracy theories and

are mobilized to take matters of election and voter "fraud" into their own hands. The conspiracy theory that Trump won the 2020 presidential election but the election, which was subsequently stolen from him, is commonly known as the "Big Lie." The Big Lie was a political tactic to claim that there was widespread electoral fraud, perpetrated by election officials such as Moss and Freeman. The Big Lie was a way to create diffuse support, engendering the far-reaching conspiracy theories and election denialism that poses a threat to our democratic institutions today (Arceneaux and Truex 2021). Trump's persistent claims of election and voter fraud beginning in 2016 and his use of social media animated voters to stage their own protests during the 2020 election. This movement quickly became known as "Stop the Steal," as far-right citizens used this phrase as a rallying cry against what they believed to be a fraudulent and corrupt election system. Stop the Steal supporters became so convinced that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump that on the day that the electoral college vote for then President-Elect Biden was to be certified by Congress, protesters staged an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Election denialism has plagued election officials across the country. Institutional threats to election administration pose a significant challenge to both election integrity and the safety of election officials. According to the data from the Brennan Center, 17 percent of election officials have indicated that they have been threatened in their job (data on file with author). These threats have manifested into physical violence in the form of assault and harassment over the phone, through social media, or by email. Over a quarter of all election officials (28 percent) report they are worried they will be physically assaulted on the job. Over 50 percent of election officials are worried about the safety of their colleagues (Brennan Center for Justice). Threats have become so pervasive, permeating from protests to electoral violence, that over 20 percent of election officials are worried about the safety of their loved ones and family (Brennan Center for Justice).

This rise in election denialism and threats to election officials, by both constituents and politicians, has had an impact on the retention of local election officials and the recruitment of new election staff. Election officials are burnt out and tired from the constant barrage of misinformation and threats to their safety, so much so that one in five election officials say they are likely to quit before the 2024 election (Brennan Center for Justice).

In my analysis of rising forms of election denialism, I spoke former Maine Secretary of State, Matt Dunlap, and current Maine Secretary of State, Shenna Bellows.[1] These conversations provided insight into election denialism in their state and across the country. Dunlap was secretary of state from 2005-2011 and again from 2013-2021. He now serves as the Maine State Auditor. Shenna Bellows took office as the secretary of state on January 4, 2021, two days before the January 6 insurrection. I include these two lawmakers to gain perspective on being an election official before and during the 2020 election cycle compared to after.

Dunlap's tenure as the secretary of state provides fourteen years of experience, as he oversaw more than thirty state-wide elections. After overseeing millions of votes cast, his office only encountered one substantiated case of voter fraud. The case involved a disgruntled college student who sent in the absentee ballot of her former roommate from the opposite political party. Dunlap equates the rapid spread of misinformation about election administration to his second-grade teacher warning her students about eating apples and rice crispy treats on Halloween and biting into razor blades. "This took on the status of a true urban legend. Every year we were told, 'do not eat apples because someone could slide a razor blade into them.' It's never happened but

[1] Both of these conversations were conducted to give background in order to determine the metrics of centralization, as well as the status of election denialism in Maine. Both Dunlap and Secretary Bellows consented to being interviewed, recorded, and have provided written consent to include their quotations in the thesis. See the Informed Consent section in the Appendix for more information.

it pervades itself. Voter fraud is the same type of urban myth." Widespread claims of national incidents of voter fraud can create severe and lasting effects on confidence in election administration. This, in turn, allows for more conspiracy theories, misinformation, assault, and harassment of election officials.

Secretary Bellows acknowledges that election denialism in Maine is not as pervasive as in other parts of the country, but the gravity of the national situation is still effecting her work and life, "when you look at the aggregate data across the country, and the impact on election workers, leading to early retirement….we've taken the seriousness of threats to elections very seriously." She has installed an at-home security system with cameras and has reported her office receiving calls from members of the public that were very angry, especially around January 6. The threats in Maine were tangible enough that municipal clerks and the Secretary of State's office supported a statewide law to protect election workers.

The perspective that these two election officials provide is valuable to compare changes in trends of threat to election officials before and after the 2020 election. Maine, and the rest of the Northeast region, however, statistically have the lowest rates of election denialism. The Brennan Center shows that the election officials in the South and West have faced the highest forms of threat, harassment, and assault out of any other region (data on file with author)**.**

The U. S has a deeply divided decentralized electoral system. Each state possesses the ability to create its system for election administration. The U.S. is a rare case among the world's democracies in its reliance upon sub-national governments for the administration of elections. Before 2000 and the passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), federal oversight over local election administration was slim. HAVA provided funding for election administration and voting equipment to every state and allowed for some federal oversight over voting practice,

voting registration, ballot counting, ballot machinery, and election administration (Palazzolo 2008). The implementation of HAVA was more seamless in states that had a centralized administration than in decentralized states (Creek and Karnes 2010).

A centralized state is defined as a state that is responsible for running elections while a decentralized state means that individual counties, municipalities, or even townships are conducting their own elections. However, there is such high fragmentation of election law that classifying a state by which level of government administers the elections is not sufficient. My study asks if how much of the elections does the state pay for, the type of training provided, and the uniformity of voting procedure and voter registration procedure will increase resilience of local election officials.

This study examines how centralization in election law impacts election officials' resilience (retention of staff and recruitment of new staff) to cope with election denialism and preserve election integrity. I hypothesize that election officials in centralized states will have higher resilience to threat and misinformation than in decentralized states. Centralized states provide uniform support to all local election divisions, alleviating the pressure and burden of combating misinformation. Because of this, I posit that election officials are much more likely to stay on staff and it will be easier to recruit staff. In a decentralized state that lacks comprehensive statewide support, individual counties will be left more vulnerable to combatting election denialism on their own, leading to faster burnout by officials. In decentralized states, there will be lower levels of staff retention and recruitment.

My thesis examines four case studies, one county from each of the four states with differing levels of centralization. The four case studies are counties in New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and Nevada. I examine the election laws and administrative procedures in each of these

states and speak with election officials about the status of election denialism in their county. Through this examination, I determine resilience in each case of centralization.

This study provides insight into subversive threats to our democratic institutions. There is an unshakeable nexus between election integrity and democracy. As election administration is demonized by factions of the population and misinformation by high-powered politicians and public figures becomes increasingly commonplace, American democracy is actively being undermined. This study is an attempt to understand the forces behind the Big Lie, and how it permeated from accusations of voter fraud in political discourse to assault and threats of violence to local election officials. Local election officials are the gateway to democracy (Partheymüeller et al. 2022). There is no institutional salvation to preserve free and fair elections beyond protecting local election officials.

State centralization of election law, however, could be a solution to protecting the electoral institution. I analyze centralization in state election law to determine what institutional protections there are to cope with a new reality of election denialism. I aim to uncover support structures that states can implement that will enable high resilience among local election officials, fortifying the gateway to democracy.

In Chapter one, I engage with the existing scholarship on election administration and the role of decentralization in U.S. election administration. This section explains that vitality of election officials' play in maintaining and protecting electoral integrity. In Chapter two, I will discuss the formation of the Big Lie and how it has proliferated into widespread election denialism. This chapter will provide background on the severity that election denialism poses to our electoral institutions. I also examine the regional breakdown in threat and assault to election officials across the county. I provide qualitative data to analyze which regions of the country face

the most frequent assault and harassment to election officials, and, in turn, have lower resilience among officials. Chapter three delves into the background of decentralization in U.S. election administration. I introduce my selected case studies as well as the metrics used to determine centralization. Chapter four details my findings from the case studies, as I provide a comprehensive analysis of centralization and resilience for every county studied.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Current discourse surrounding elections continuously emphasizes the critical point of history that we are in. However, scholarship about threats to elections and electoral institutions often fail to explain the nuances of political, legal, and social factors that have shaped American electoral institutions as we know them today. Throughout this chapter, I will engage with scholarly literature to explain what the present threats to elections are and how political and legal debates and structures impact election integrity. I examine the place of federal, state, and local actors in elections. In doing so, I will highlight the areas that are missing from the ongoing study of the capacity and limitations of election administrators as actors of the state and as individual enforcers of election integrity.

AMERICAN FEDERALISM IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Electoral law and policy go hand in hand with how both election administrators conduct elections and how voters experience elections. Article I, Section IV, Clause I of the Constitution states, "The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Places of chusing Senators." It is enumerated in the U.S. Constitution that states have the power to implement their own elections. Before the Revolutionary War, the colonies did not have a standardized election date; a local official would simply publicize an election date, time, and place for voting. The election administration – voter registration, ballot preparation, the storage of ballots, setting up voting devices, early voting, and mail voting – did not exist (Hale et al. 2015, 54). Hale et al. explain that election administration was an intermittent chore for various local officials whose primary responsibilities were in other functions of government. Well into the nineteenth century, political

parties prepared ballots, and representatives would stand outside polling places and try to persuade or bribe voters to take their ballots. Slowly, states began to adopt their own structure of administration. Over time in the 19th century, voter registration was adopted which required local officials to receive applications, maintain lists, and prepare lists of registrants to be used as polling places. Even as election administration become standard, states did not do so in sync. This staggered implementation of election administration was a symptom of decentralization in election law throughout the nation. Some states created specialized election boards and offices at the local level; however, in most states, there was no single officer charged with ensuring uniformity of administration by local officials (Hale et al., 2015, 55). This history speaks to the lack of a uniform election foundation in the U.S.

The current electoral landscape in the U.S. is vastly different as we move from state to state and, in some cases, county to county. This fragmented election system leaves voters vulnerable to varying levels of discrimination without much federal oversight. Within American federalism, electoral institutions – and by extension, state governments – are used to define the subset of the public that is and is not going to be represented (Springer 2014, 14). State electoral institutions take on the role of federal institutions in the actual administration and functionality of elections. Varying state election laws mean things like state and local management of registration lists and policy places as well as county-by-county or even precinct-by-precinct variations in voting technologies, ballot designs, voter instructions, and vote counting standards (Nussbaumer, 2013). Nussbaumer explains the allocation of local control of the electoral arena to demonstrate the federation's “electoral independence” (Nussbaumer 2013, 392). This electoral independence does provide agency to states to decide on how they will conduct their elections. The state electoral hierarchy can limit the amount of discretion of each actor within the electoral apparatus.

Election administrators are saddled with much more responsibility than simply administering elections. Hale and Slaton explain that even in today's modern context of elections federal, state, and local governments have long been intertwined in the election system, each playing a role in defining voter eligibility, identifying elected offices, and deciding where, when, and how elections will be conducted. Further confounding the election system is the fact that election administration is not always a full-time job. In rural or less populous localities in particular, election officials rely heavily on a temporary workforce of poll workers and monitors who serve for a nominal wage or as volunteers. Local elections offices are responsible for functions as diverse as population records (births and deaths), tax payments, passports, and budgeting (Hale and Slaton 2008). Recently, election officers have been flooded with record requests as a retaliation strategy to claims that election administrators were responsible for stealing the 2020 presidential election (Moran 2022). In locations that are particularly small and rural or locations that do not have sufficient election staff that is trained properly, things like record requests can be extremely harmful. When the federal, state, and local governments fail to have a uniform system of elections, election administrations are easily overwhelmed and lack oversight and support which can harm their ability to conduct free and fair elections.

IMPLICATIONS OF ELECTION ADMINSTRATION

Election officials are considered the gatekeepers of democracy (Partheymüeller et al., 2022). They are what bridge the gap between what the government intends on election day and what the citizens experience (Hall et al. 2008). Hall et al. name poll workers and election officials "street-level bureaucrats" because they are both the symbol of election administration, especially on election day, and they also have the ability to make one's voting experience pleasant and rewarding or difficult and miserable (Hall et al. 2008). How voter information is

displayed, voter registration procedure, voting technology, how to fill out a ballot, if a provisional ballot can be issued, and wait times can all be informed by the poll workers. Election officials wield a lot of power when it comes to shaping one's voting experience, as they can influence voter confidence and perception of elections. A symptom of the decentralized election system in the U.S. is that there is no uniform procedure every election official must follow. Instead, differing levels of pre-existing state election procedures and oversight can allow poll workers to decide to what extent they will follow guidelines (Hall et al. 2008, 508). According to Hall et al, this leads to poll workers having considerable discretion as to which election laws they implement and how they go about doing so (Hall et al. 2008, 508). For example, in a survey of Los Angeles polling places in 2002, 30 percent of the head poll workers surveyed stated that every voter had to show identification in order to vote, even though a requirement to show identification is in direct conflict with California law governing voter identification (Hall et al. 2008, 508). Election officials, thus, have an incredible impact on electoral integrity, one of the most important mechanisms of a functioning democratic institution.

One of the largest threats to allowing this democratic institution to continue is the ability to recruit poll workers (Clark and James 2021). Being a poll worker is a high-stress, temporary, low-paying position, which has led to difficulty in recruiting poll workers across the board. Clark and James asses what motivates people to give their time to provide this vital public service to their fellow citizens and democracy generally. They find that for many poll workers, the stipend they receive is an important part of what induces them to volunteer. Their findings are contradictory to previous research that states that poll workers are driven to volunteer out of a sense of service. A highly decentralized system, in which counties set wages and are responsible for paying salaries, will not be conducive to recruiting poll workers that are mainly motivated by

material benefits. It is useful to our understanding of this study to understand why poll workers volunteer in elections, as it could be a factor in determining resiliency in election officials.

The scholarship on election administration examines how election officials themselves are a vital piece to the upkeep and maintenance of democracy. However, largely untouched, is poll workers' own confidence in administering elections. (Partheymüeller et al. 2022). Partheymüeller et al. find that partisan poll workers are equally or even more skeptical regarding foreign interference in the electoral process or the media campaign coverage. The saliency of this internal threat will not only pose challenges to the institution of election administration itself but deeply affect voters as research shows that lower confidence in election officials will influence administrative performance which has an effect on voter confidence in general (Partheymüeller et al. 2022). Research shows when administrative performance is low, citizens are less satisfied with democracy (Partheymüeller et al. 2022, 2).

There are mechanisms to ensure that administrative performance will lead to high voter confidence, however. Glaser et al. find that the training and experience of poll workers lead to lower residual vote rates. In their study, they define the residual vote rate the number of ballots cast minus the number of votes for a specific race (Glaser et al. 2007, 3). They find that the residual vote rate has a direct correlation with general poll worker confidence either before or after election day. Confidence and low residual voter rates are also correlated with the confidence to operate or demonstrate voting equipment. This is a cautionary tale for election administrations who make critical choices about the human and technical inputs of voting machines, or the lack thereof (Glaser et al. 2007). Election officials that are able to have proper training and experience with voting systems have more confidence. It is important to consider the need for training for all election officials, as it is vital for both official and voter confidence

and the execution of the election. However, the highly decentralized nature of U.S. elections creates an election administration structure that is heterogenous in terms of occupational status, election experience, training exposure, and confidence. While this leaves the confidence and administration of elections subjective from county to town or even township to township, reform efforts do exist to unify election administration generally.

HAVA AND CENTRALIZATION

Prior to the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), there was little federal oversight in local elections was relatively limited. Once HAVA was passed in 2002 certain federal standards were implemented to give states some federal guidance and resources in conducting their elections. HAVA instituted reforms like statewide voter registration, provisional balloting, procedures that allow voters to correct their ballot, and standard procedures for conducting ballot recounts; as well as fiscal contractions that promoted upgrades in registration systems, resources for new machinery, and funds for voter education or poll worker recruitment (Palazzolo 2008, 23-27). Prior to HAVA, election administration was concentrated at the local level. After HAVA, the federal government increased its responsibility for overseeing election administration and made the state the central actor in elections (Montjoy 2008). At the same time, HAVA still provides a great deal of discretion to state and local officials in the purchase of election technologies and other aspects of election administration (Moynihan and Silva 2008). HAVA gave the states discretion in how they would meet the federal standards and how much power the state government would have over the local election districts. Because of this discretion, states and localities have become HAVA compliant, while still demonstrating significant variation in election administration across the country. Depending on the level of centralized authority

exercised by the state over the local districts, there is also variation in election administration within the states (Creek and Karnes 2010).

When HAVA was implemented, states that were already considered centralized were able to meet the new requirements more efficiently than decentralized states. Palazzolo argues that the structural factors that were instrumental in the success of HAVA implementation include the perceived "threat" (likelihood) of a close election, the "capacity" of the state's election law (the degree to which the minimum requirements detailed above were already in place), the state's political culture, the nature of partisan control of the peak political institutions. (Palazzolo 2008, 8). Creek and Karnes elaborate on Palazzolo's argument on the capacity of state election law; they posit that in centralized states, control of election administration is concentrated at the state level, thus making the decision-making process easier. In decentralized states, coordination with all levels of election administration makes implementation harder. Centralization was advantageous for rural districts especially, as the burden for certain expenses and election upkeep was then taken on by the state. Rural districts often work not only with limited resources, due to their small populations and limited tax bases, but must also serve expansive areas. The process of becoming HAVA-compliant requires resources such as staff, funding, technical expertise, and buildings accessible to the disabled that can be used for polling places. These are all costs that are greater burdens on rural than on urban districts (Creek and Karnes 2010). If the state takes on some of the administrative and, especially, the financial burden, election officials may have more resources to conduct their elections more efficiently. Decentralization, on the other hand, was beneficial in states with highly heterogeneous populations – as each district has special needs that should be controlled by local expertise. In a state that has a population that varies greatly by size, race, partisanship, and wealth one centralized administrative system has the potential to

overlook nuances that individual localities can identify to best conduct their elections (Creek and Karnes 2010).

Even with the implementation of HAVA, state and local officials remain empowered to make discretionary, ministerial, administrative, or adjudicative decisions about matters such as polling place hours, legislation list purges, voting, and vote county (Nussbaumer 2013, 369). The problem with this fragmented system of administration is it opens the door to either a partisan, factional, or incumbent/challenger electoral bias election decision making. State and local officials thus have, or are perceived to have, their hands on important levers of the electoral success and failure of electoral incentives to federal officials (Nussbaumer 2013, 369). This leaves election local election officials at the will of partisan politics that may work against equal election reform. Each locality can only operate with the resources it has available. Those who lack sufficient laws or even protections for election officials will have a harder time administering elections. These varying processes of administration will have an impact on resilience and capacity of coping with the Big Lie. Preserving national electoral integrity is only as good as the least resourced state, county, municipality, or township.

VOTER CONFIDENCE IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Voters equate their confidence in elections to their confidence in democracy. Because election administrators are at the front lines of elections, they are often seen as the guardians of democracy – the election workers are the link between the citizen's vote and their elected leaders. If voters do not have confidence that their vote is counted correctly, then the most fundamental aspect of a representative democracy is put in doubt (Atkeson and Saunders 2008). Election administration, thus, informs voter confidence or, just as likely, mistrust in elections. Previous scholarship has shown that voter confidence may be prone to manipulation by partisan

actors who are disgruntled about the election outcome, by well-intentioned election reformers who are suspicious of voting technologies, and by media actors who spotlight a small number of fraud and error without mentioning the many elections that have come off without a hitch (Gronke 2014, 250). These partisan claims that Gronke references have increased since 2000 deeply influenced voter confidence. This has led to a stark difference in the levels of voter confidence among partisan lines (Hasen 2021).

Alvarez et al. conducted a study of voter confidence immediately after the 2020 presidential election. They found that Democrats consistently had substantially higher levels of confidence in the 2020 election than Republicans. (Alvarez et. al 2020, 4). Yimeng Li studies perceptions of voter fraud in the 2020 election and finds similar results (Li 2020, 3). Gronke demonstrates that a large part of voter confidence is tied up with voters' perception of local election administration. He explains that there is a tendency among voters to blame election administrators when their party loses (Gronke 2014, 255). As elections have increasingly been subject to partisan accusations, voters tend to accuse local election administrators of making mistakes or of voter fraud when they believe their party should have won.

The ability of election administrators to conduct free and fair elections is not a technical administrative issue, rather it has a real impact on the confidence of our electoral system. Hale, Montjoy, and Brown apply principal-agent theory to explain that elections illustrate a peculiar and enduring circumstance, the potential for an intermediate principal to manipulate the process in his own interest or that of his party (Hale et al. 2015, 28) Incendiary rhetoric used by candidates has a deeply harmful effect on election integrity. Election administration is not cut and dry, nor do the election administrators possess all the agency. Instead, various spheres of

influence (state level centralization, candidate rhetoric, and legal decisions) are embedded in the U.S. electoral system and converge to decide who is going to be represented and who is not.

CONCLUSION

Decentralization in election law is grounded in historical contexts of federalism, state autonomy, and varying state laws. This has created a fragmented system of elections and has led to a lack of uniformity within election administration, across the country and within states. Scholars posit that it is these high levels of decentralization that stymie the implementation of reform efforts to provide oversight of state and local election administration. Reforms like HAVA advocated for after the 2000 presidential election, called attention to the lack of centralized authority of local election administration. Election administrators began to be perceived as gatekeepers to a healthy democracy, regardless of how much agency they really possessed. Although a decentralized system does allow discretion of local election administration, scholars point to compounding factors of election administration that can inhibit the work of local election officials.

In the modern context, scholarship highlights forced misinformation, incendiary rhetoric, violence, and threats of violence against election administrators that threaten electoral integrity. My research is aimed at concluding whether the threats to election integrity are impacting election officials' ability to retain staff members and recruit new ones. My research will show if jurisdictions in states with high levels of centralization, states with high levels of decentralization, or states with a "hybrid" mix of centralization have differing capacities to uphold the democratic electoral institution.

Chapter Two: Stop the Steal: The origins and expansion of the "Big Lie"

The Big Lie is a frequent term used in discussions of Trump's rejection of the 2020 Presidential election results. However, the media and politicians often fail to delve into the recent history of this term and how it has transformed politics and especially elections. As I will explain, the Big Lie and its implied accusations of voter and election fraud are nothing new in American politics. However, what this new wave of election denialism stands for is much more than skepticism in the voting procedure. The Big Lie questions the legitimacy of the entire electoral process. What started as casual chides of voter fraud has now politicized every single step, from voter confidence in the administration of elections, to incendiary comments and rhetoric made by politicians, to state legislative action. Election officials across the country have experienced increased assault, harassment, and subsequent fear of being threatened or having a loved one or colleague threatened.

In this chapter, I will explain the origins of election denialism and when this threat became salient enough to spread across American political discourse. I will dive into why and how the Big Lie has gained so much traction among the Republican party, and how these beliefs have become entrenched in state law in some places. I also explore how the conspiracy that the 2020 presidential election would be stolen, then subsequently stolen, impacted the work and safety of election workers in varying parts of the country. I explain how election threats and misinformation are more prevalent in certain parts of the country, thus resulting in differing experiences with election denialism.

CONTROVERSY IN 2000 AND 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Although there is a long history of contested elections in American politics, in the modern era claims of voter fraud and rigged elections became much more frequent in the

political lexicon after the 2000 Presidential election. The debate of who won the presidency came down to election administration and voter procedure in Florida. Fifteen counties in Florida used a "punch card" voting system. This meant that voters would use a machine to punch holes over the circle that corresponded to the candidate they were voting for. The ballots were then entered by poll workers into another machine that would count the holes and calculate which candidate received the most votes. However, if the ballots were not fed into the machine correctly or the hole was not punched through the ballot, the machine would not count the vote. The vote was so close between Bush and Gore – Gore trailed 1,784 votes behind Bush – that there was a machine recount. Gore still found himself behind, so he asked for a recount by hand, where he was expected to recover many votes. The partisan debate commenced as there was fighting over the how, the when, and the legality of a hand recount (Hasen 2012, 12).

This led to the Supreme Court case *Bush v. Gore (2000),* which shook national confidence while simultaneously dividing the political parties over the issue of election administration. "In the years since the Florida debacle of 2000, we have witnessed a partisan war over election rules. The number of election-related lawsuits has more than doubled compared to the previous decade, and election time invariably brings out partisan accusations of voter fraud and voter suppression" (Hasen 2012, 4). The Florida debacle of 2000 was highly partisan, as Republicans pointed fingers at Democrats for trying to steal the election, and Democrats pointed fingers at Republicans for trying to disregard valid and legitimate ballots that antiquated voting machines were unable to count. The debate over counting votes in a handful of counties in Florida became so contentious that as the Miami-Dade board began a partial recount,

Republicans flew down House staffers from Washington, D.C., to protest the recount, yelling "Stop the Fraud" and "Let us in" (Hasen 2012, 32-33).[2]

Four years after one of the most contentious elections in modern U.S. history, President Bush went head-to-head with Democratic Presidential nominee John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. The 2004 election was fraught across the board. There were, however, specifically troubling claims coming out of Ohio, the very battleground state that clinched Bush's 2004 victory in the electoral college (Kennedy 2006, 2). It was alleged that officials in Ohio purged tens of thousands of eligible voters from the rolls, neglected to process registration cards generated by Democratic voter drives, shortchanged Democratic precincts when they allocated voting machines, and illegally derailed a recount that could have given Kerry the presidency (Kennedy 2006, 1). Republicans allegedly prevented at least 357,000 voters, the overwhelming majority of them Democratic, from casting ballots or having their votes counted in 2004. This was more than enough to shift the results of an election decided by only 118,601 votes (Kennedy 2006, 2). Democrats began pointing fingers at Republicans, claiming there was a concerted effort of the incumbent administration to suppress voters in Ohio (Kennedy 2006, 3).

These controversy-riddled elections challenged the legitimacy of the American electoral system. Both the federal government and the state legislatures were pressed into action after not just the legitimacy of George W. Bush's presidency, but American democracy itself, was put into question. Despite legislative efforts to reform election administration, the accusations of failures in the electoral institution skyrocketed after the 2000 election (Hasen, 2021). Democrats would

[2]As votes in the 2020 presidential election were being counted, and many localities had President Biden and other down-ballot Democratic candidates leading. Trump supporters stood outside polling places chanting "Stop the steal." This same chant rang loud as insurrectionists screamed "Stop the Steal" outside the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. While not identical, the very rhetoric of Democrats stealing the 2000 election has permeated into a rallying cry for the far right today.

often blame Republicans for voter discrimination and Republicans would accuse the left of voter fraud.

The rhetoric of fraudulent elections did not originate with Trump. Hasen writes that the primary purpose of voter fraud claims following the 2000 election "was a primarily Republican-led effort to pass laws that would obstruct voter access, such as voter identification and registration laws. Narratives of voter fraud also riled up Republican bases by fueling tribalism and animus (Hasen 2021, 267). "Republican elites have been raising alarms about 'voter fraud' or more than two decades, using these assertions to justify increasingly stringent voting requirements that target Democratic constituencies, particularly voters of color. Republican trust in elections has declined steadily during this period" (Drutman 2021, 11). Democrats, as a response, called foul as they believe these laws were a form of voter suppression aimed at minority voters, who consistently vote Democratic.

Highly partisan claims of widespread voter fraud justified discriminatory legislation under the guise of protecting against fraudulent elections. Hasen explains that the Trump presidency expanded these claims from purely rhetoric to a "new level of delegitimation of the election process itself, raising the danger of election subversion" (Hasen 2021, 267). Claims of corruption in 2000 and 2004 left their mark on the trajectory of election denialism rhetoric: partisan accusations of fraud started to become commonplace, opening the door to large-scale efforts to overturn election results that we have seen today. The clear escalation of claims of voter fraud, surging after the 2000 election, gave President Trump a perfect opening to pick up on fears voters had of rigged elections.

TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BIG LIE

Claims of voter fraud were a trademark of Trump's tenure as president. As soon as he won the general election in 2016, he began spreading misinformation that there had been millions of fraudulent ballots cast in favor of his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Despite winning the Electoral College, President Trump lost the popular vote by three million votes. He conveniently claimed that three million noncitizens voted for Clinton, that the election was "rigged," and that he won the popular vote (Hasen 2021, 267). No evidence was found to support these claims, yet President Trump construed a salient enough threat of voter fraud to create the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity. This commission was formed to investigate the allegations of illegal ballots being cast for Clinton in the 2016 election (Brennan Center 2017), and to make findings of the potential for widespread voter fraud to serve as the predicate for Congress passing a law allowing states to require documentary proof of citizenship before people would be eligible to register to vote (Hasen 2021, 268)

Although the Commission proved unsuccessful, this did not encourage Trump and his allies to distance themselves from claims of rigged and stolen elections. Trump's claims of voter fraud resonated with his base and set him up on a trajectory to deny the 2020 presidential results, regardless of the winner. Planting the seeds of voter fraud was a preemptive power grab for President Trump, as the 2020 presidential election was speculated to be highly competitive. Trump used this type of polarizing rhetoric to blame Democrats for voter fraud *before* the election had even taken place. The COVID-19 pandemic gave Trump an in for claiming there was voter fraud, as he and his supporters could now point fingers at surges in mail-in voting (Drutman 2021; Hasen 2021, 268).

Trump is not the first political figure to attempt to persuade a populous of a lie,[3] however politicians that use conspiracy theories to co-opt their population tend to be authoritarian (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 3). For a political figure in a democratic regime, like Trump, propaganda and political indoctrination are about establishing dominance and the preservation of power, “the lie itself also originates from those in power, usually in their effort to stay in power or preserve a political advantage. A Big Lie usually contains elements of conspiracy, centering around the idea that a hidden group of powerful people exerts some nefarious influence on society behind the scenes" (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 3). The Big Lie around the 2020 election has allowed Trump to dominate other Republican elites, in a fashion not dissimilar from how leaders in authoritarian systems force their citizens to perpetuate lies (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 13). Trump simultaneously tapped into polarization and divisiveness between political parties and fear among Republican politicians that they had to conform to his agenda. Big Lies told by elites can thus engender millions of smaller lies at the individual level, as citizens are forced to present themselves a certain way out of fear (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 3). Trump tactically engaged with millions of supporters to catalyze a movement of diffuse election

[3] The term “Big Lie” was first coined by Adolph Hitler in his manifesto *Mein Kampf*. Hitler used the term to claim that Jewish people were spreading lies regarding the German army’s performance in WWI (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 3). Hitler wrote, “In the Big Lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the Big Lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.” This chilling statement is frighteningly close to tactics used by politicians to undermine U.S. election systems.

denialism. Through these tactics of divisiveness, emotional manipulation, and political domination, the Big Lie, as we know it today, was born.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ESCALATION OF THE BIG LIE

Trump's inflammatory claims on social media and at rallies led to one of the most infamous moments in modern American political history: the January 6 insurrection. As election results from the 2020 presidential election began to be tabulated, it seemed increasingly clear that Joe Biden would become the 46th President of the United States. Trump went Twitter to tell his supporters that the election was being stolen by the Democrats.[4] Three-fifths of Trump's 1,500 plus tweets between November 4, 2020 (the day after the 2020 presidential election) and January 8, 2020 (the day that Trump was permanently suspended from Twitter) were messages that sought to challenge the results of the 2020 election. This is an average of 14 tweets per day about voter fraud and Democrats stealing the election (Ratliff 2021). During this time, Trump had 88.3 million followers on Twitter. In fact, in between losing the election on November 5, 2022, and the aftermath of January 6, Trump had gained 52,000 new Twitter followers (Mak 2021).

Trump alleged that mail-in ballots that were still being counted after the polls had closed were both fraudulent and a democratic effort to steal the election away from him (Drutman 2021). He filed lawsuits in various states to put an injunction on counting votes in various states.

[4] On November 4, 2020, the day after Election Day, Trump tweeted: "We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Polls are closed!" On November 15, he tweeted: "He only won in the eyes of the FAKE NEWS MEDIA. I concede NOTHING! We have a long way to go. This was a RIGGED ELECTION!" On December 12, he tweeted: "I WON THE ELECTION IN A LANDSLIDE, but remember, I only think in terms of legal votes, not all of the fake voters and fraud that miraculously floated in from everywhere! What a disgrace!" (Ratliff 2021).

He was asking for judges to tell election workers that they had to stop the count or the more commonly known phrase, to "Stop the Steal" (Atlantic Council 2021).

The Stop the Steal narrative consisted of three main aspects that Trump used to sow doubt in the results of the 2020 Presidential election: 1) The expansion of mailed ballots in the 2020 election created an opportunity for Democrats to engage in massive voter fraud. 2) Trump won the election. 3) Trump was within his right to challenge the results and not concede, and Republican legislatures and governors in states where Biden won should have used their power to appoint their slate of Trump-supporting electors in order for him to make his challenge (Drutman 2021, 5).

The use of social media to rile up and convince supporters that Trump was the true winner of the 2020 Presidential election was crucial. President Trump had primed his supporters on social media for years before the 2020 election, beginning with the calls that the 2016 election was fraudulent to claim that mail-in ballots would rig the election. Social media allowed for "fake news" to spread rapidly through partisan networks and echo chambers, making it easier for lies about politics to spread faster than the truth (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 2). When it comes to the spread of domestic misinformation, it is extremely hard to control, as social media has been a conduit for the rapid spread of misinformation. Social media companies often do nothing to stop the spread of misinformation, and when they do, they have trouble regulating falsities found on their sites (Muller 2020).

Beyond social media, partisan news networks such as Fox News, Newsmax, and the One America News Network, all of which were deemed "friendly" to Trump's lies about the election, allowed his claims about voter fraud and the stolen election to reach and activate the Trump

base.[5] This was not a coincidence, but a political strategy (Hasen 2021, 270), one that is reminiscent of authoritarian tactics, political propaganda, and indoctrination to persuade the populace of a lie. Trump's effort to mobilize his base to maintain power and political domination came worryingly close to working.

JANUARY 6 AND ITS IMPLICATION

On January 5, 2021, Trump tweeted: "Washington is being inundated with people who do not want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won't take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" (Ratliff 2021). Thousands of supporters of President Trump had arrived in Washington to protest the certification of President Biden. The next day, thousands of rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol to physically prevent the certification of President Biden. The insurrection left over 140 law enforcement officers injured, four Trump supporters dead, and four Capitol police officers later died by suicide by August 2021. Some officers' injuries were serious, including a lost eye, broken ribs and spinal disks, and concussions; insurrectionists tased one officer so many times that he had a heart attack (Hasen 2021, 276). Trump told his supporters on Twitter on January 6 that the issue of the stolen election could all be solved if Vice President Mike Pence just sent the votes back to the states. He wrote, "states

[5]Dominion Voting Systems, a company that produces and sells voting machines and tabulators, among other systems of voting hardware and software, is suing Fox News for defamation, alleging the cable TV network amplified false claims that Dominion voting machines were used to rig the 2020 U.S. presidential election against Donald Trump and in favor of Joe Biden. Dominion Voting Systems alleges that newscasters at Fox News were aware that these claims were false but nevertheless recklessly propagated this misinformation on live television (Coster and Queen 2023). Rupert Murdoch, chairman of the conservative media empire that owns Fox News, acknowledged in a deposition that several hosts for his networks promoted the false narrative that the election in 2020 was stolen from former President Donald J. Trump (Peters and Robertson 2023).

want to correct their votes, which they now know were based on irregularities and fraud, plus corrupt processes never received legislative approval. All Mike Pence has to do is send them back to the states, AND WE WIN. Do it, Mike, this is a time for extreme courage!" (Atlantic Council 2021). When it became clear that Vice President Pence was moving along with the certification of President Biden, supporters ran around the Capitol in a furious mob, searching for Pence. Their chants of "hang Mike Pence " carried through the Capitol. Once seen as an ally of the 'Stop the Steal' movement, Pence was now under attack by Trump's mob as directed by Trump himself. After January 6, Twitter moved to permanently suspend Trump from their platform. It may have come too late. Hasen writes, "Deplatforming President Trump did little to dampen the enthusiasm among some conservatives and Republicans to relitigate November 2020 and insist on a Trump victory" (Hasen 2021, 277).

The January 6 insurrection stands as a marker of how the misinformation and conspiracy theories about the Big Lie manifest themselves in large-scale physical violence and disruption of democracy. While President Trump is accused by many of inciting the violence on January 6, the movement became larger than him. Despite being in the U.S. Capitol when the insurrectionists started to violently force their way in, 138 House Republicans and eight senators voted against certifying in at least one state that President Biden won (Jacobson 2021, 274). And 126 House Republicans, seven Republican senators, and 18 Republican state Attorneys Generals endorsed a suit by the Texas Attorney General (drafted by Trump's lawyers) asking the Supreme Court to toss out the official results in four states (Jacobson 2021, 274).

Following January 6, Democrats moved to sanction president Trump for inciting violence in the Capitol that threatened the status of democracy and disenfranchised millions of voters. However, most Congressional Republicans refused to do so, with large majorities voting against

his second impeachment in the House and conviction in the Senate (Jacobson 2021, 274). Many GOP politicians not only believed but also publicly supported Trump's accusations that the election was stolen.

The threat of misinformation and conspiracy theories was highlighted during the insurrection, but the situation became more dire as political actors from within legislatures at all levels of government moved to systematically undermine President Biden's win. The Republican-led Senate in Arizona, for example, ordered an "audit" of the state's presidential election results months after President Biden took office. The senators employed a firm, "Cyber Ninjas," that had no experience conducting election audits and was headed by someone who had parroted Trump's false claims of a stolen election. The sham audit revealed no evidence of a stolen election. Similar bogus investigations took place in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania by state lawmakers (Hasen 2021, 277). The Big Lie resulted in unified action among GOP lawmakers to lean into claims of election denialism as a legitimate threat that needs legislative fixing.

EFFECT ON REPUBLICAN LAWMAKERS

Claims of election denialism have become such a mainstream sticking point of Republican politicians that any lawmakers who did not support Trump or conspiracy theories that he won the 2020 election fear losing reelection. Jacobson writes, "The Republican politicians who humored Trump's seditious urgings put protection of their futures within the party above concern for that party's collective future if devotion to Trump remains its defining feature" (Jacobson 2021, 274). Even if a Republican politician does not support all (or even any) of the assertions that the election was rigged or stolen, they are going along with it just for the pure survival of their political career. This makes it difficult for Republican leaders to take a

stand against the Big Lie and requires them to at least pretend that the foundation of American democracy—its electoral apparatus—is corrupt and broken. (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 13).

There is a legitimate fear factor among Republicans that if they push back against accusations of election denialism, they will be ousted from the party. This is exactly what happened to Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming. Cheney was one of the GOP's harshest critics of President Trump, his false election claims, and the January 6 attack. Cheney was the third-ranking Republican in the House and was one of ten House Republicans to vote to impeach Trump for "incitement of insurrection" (Montanaro 2021). Shortly after, Cheney was ousted from her GOP leadership position (Sotomayor and Alemany 2021). Following her removal from leadership, Cheney became Vice Chair of the U.S. House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack to investigate the insurrection and Trump's role in it. Cheney's involvement in the panel came with a political price. Seeking her fourth term in Congress, Cheney lost in the primary to Trump-backed opponent Harriet Hageman. Hageman won the primary with 66.3 percent of the vote to Cheney's 28.9 percent (Beavers and Montellaro 2022), indicating a strong rebuke of Republican politicians who were willing to speak out against Trump.

Cheney's race was the last outstanding primary race of the ten House Republicans who voted to impeach Trump over his role in the Jan. 6 assault. Only six of those members sought reelection, and just two won their primary races and advanced to their general election sending a clear signal of Trump's iron grip over the party even out of office (Beavers and Montellaro 2022). The message to other GOP politicians was sent loud and clear: if they stay in line, they need not worry about re-election, "as long as elected Republican politicians perceive that they will be punished for not contesting the election results, they may go along with the Big Lie to preserve their career prospects" (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 12).

PARTISANSHIP OF THE BIG LIE

As it is made clear from the insurrection on January 6, people believed in and supported the claim that the 2020 presidential election was rigged. Roughly one in four Americans say that they do not believe the election result was legitimate or do not identify Joe Biden as the winner (Arceneaux and Truex 2021, 2). When asked directly in a Pew survey "who do you think won the 2020 election – that is, who received the most votes from eligible voters in enough states to win the election," 64 percent of Republicans and 75 percent of Trump voters said that Trump won the election (Jacobson 2021, 275). In November, before the certification of Biden's presidency, 73 percent of Republicans and 79 percent of Trump voters had also endorsed his refusal to concede, though these proportions declined in December to 62 percent and 69 percent, respectively. Even after Congress had certified Biden's win in January, majorities of Republicans (51 percent) and Trump voters (56 percent) said he should not concede (Jacobson 2021). Although we see a decline in the number of Republicans and Trump voters that support Trump not conceding the presidency, it is still a majority, even after the violent insurrection at the Capitol. Among Republicans, 85 percent believe it was appropriate for Trump to file lawsuits challenging election results in several states and the same proportion believe that vote-by-mail increases vote fraud; 46 percent of Republicans believe it was appropriate for legislators in states won by Biden to try to assign their state's electoral votes to Trump (Drutman 2021, 6).

We see strong partisan ties between election denialism and Republican voters. Drutman finds a strong correlation between "Stop the Steal" supporters and Trump supporters (Drutman 2021, 10). In the months following the election, more than 95 percent of Biden voters said the election was fair and Biden was the legitimate winner, and about 80 percent of Trump voters said the opposite (Jacobson 2021, 275). There is also an unsurprising partisan split over support of the

January 6 insurrection, with16 percent of Republicans approving of storming the U.S. Capitol while only 2 percent of Democrats approve (The Economist/YouGov 2021). Perceptions of whether Trump was involved in inciting the violence are highly partisan, as well. A striking 88 percent of Biden supporters believed Trump was responsible for inciting violence while only eight percent of Trump supporters believed so (The Economist/YouGov 2021).

Beyond the physical attack on the U.S. Capitol, a partisan divide remains on how Trump should be held responsible. Nine in ten Biden voters and 83 percent of Democrats answered affirmatively when asked if President Trump should resign following January 6. In contrast, only 10 percent of Trump voters and 13 percent of Republicans said he should resign (The Economist/YouGov 2021). The Congressional investigation and articles of impeachment against President Trump were seen through highly partisan eyes. Most Democrats (69 percent) viewed the Congressional investigation as a serious attempt to find out what happened, while most Republicans (64 percent) called it a politically motivated attempt to embarrass President Trump (The Economist/YouGov 2021).

Data shows that the Big Lie includes more than just accusations of rigged elections, but a willingness to incite violence. Those who supported President Trump's efforts to undermine the 2020 election, or "Stop the Steal" supporters, were highly convinced that President Biden was not fairly elected and that all measures to assure that he was not certified on January 6. Trump's incendiary rhetoric permeated into real-life actions of violence. The threat that the subversive violence that was seen on January 6 could happen again feels tangible when looking at the percentages of Trump supporters and Republicans who supported, or did not condemn, the insurrection. Many Trump voters and Republicans have denied that Trump had responsibility for inciting this violence and that Congress should not go through with holding him accountable.

The Big Lie has expanded from threats of voter fraud into beliefs that are antithetical to democratic institutions in this country.

PERCEPTIONS OF VOTER FRAUD TODAY

The pervasiveness of the Big Lie has become so mainstream in the U.S. that there are statistically significant jumps in those who believed in voter fraud or had low levels of confidence during the 2018 midterm elections and the 2020 presidential election. While Trump started to sow the seeds of election denialism after the 2016 presidential election, the Stop the Steal movement had significant influence over voters during the 2020 presidential election. Even after January 6, 80 percent of Trump voters and 73 percent of Republicans believed that there was widespread fraud in the 2020 election (Pew Research Center 2022).

Divisive comments that absentee or mail-in ballots are fraudulent led to a lack of confidence in not only mail-in voting but also in-person voting in the 2022 midterm elections. Only 26 percent of Republicans said they were "very confident" in having their vote counted correctly at an in-person polling place while 53 percent said they were somewhat confident. This number drops dramatically when asked if Republican voters are confident in absentee or mail-in votes being counted directly: only ten percent said very confident and 27 percent said somewhat confident (Pew Research Center 2022). Democratic voters expressed a far higher level of confidence in the vote counts for in-person voting and absentee ballots, with 55 percent of Democrats saying they were very confident and 39 percent somewhat confident that their in-person votes would be counted correctly. For mail-in ballots, 43 percent of Democrats responded as very confident, and 44 percent responded as somewhat confident that they would be counted (Pew Research Center 2022). Narratives that there is rampant voter fraud created a salient threat of election denialism- specifically among Republican voters- that is only continuing to grow.

Following the 2020 election, Trump was permanently banned from Twitter, reducing his capacity to send out incendiary comments. Because Trump was no longer on Twitter, fewer people may have been incited by his misinformation and conspiracy theories. This, in turn, may have increased election confidence in comparison to 2020. However, there were fewer people in 2018 who believed in voter fraud and lacked confidence in election administration. The damage of the Big Lie was already done. In comparison to 2018, there are significantly lower levels of confidence in election administration among Republicans (Pew Research Center 2022). Compared to Democrats, GOP voter confidence remains extremely low. This drumbeat has led to public protests over vote counting and threats of violence against elected officials. It also helped to bring pressure from below on elected officials to consider taking steps to turn a Trump loss into a victory.

STATE-LEVEL POLITICIZATION OF THE BIG LIE

The polarization of beliefs of election denialism and election fraud has expanded beyond the populace and into partisan politics at every level of government. Among the many permutations that the Big Lie has taken, state legislatures have used these widespread claims of voter fraud to justify bills that politicize, criminalize, or interfere with elections (States United Democracy Center 2021). Just in 2021, 148 bills across 36 states have been proposed in state legislatures (States United Democracy Center 2021). These bills pose a threat to our democratic, legal, and electoral institutions in four clear ways: legislative seizure of control over elections, legislative seizure of election responsibilities, legislative meddling in election minutiae, legislative imposition of criminal or other penalties for election decisions (States United Democracy Center 2021). These bills are a transparent response to the failed effort by some

legislators in key swing states to change the result of the 2020 election (States United Democracy Center 2021).

A cluster of state proposals imposes new criminal or civil penalties on local election officials. Many of these bills—which seem designed to posture and express outrage— change legal standards, rewrite existing investigative processes, or shift legal burdens in ways that would increase the incidence of litigation over election processes and outcomes in the states (States United Democracy Center 2021). One example of the shift toward increased penalties and election policing is Arkansas S.B. 604.9. Under current law, Arkansas's State Board of Election Commissioners undertakes an investigation when someone alleges there has been a violation of election law or voter registration requirements. Arkansas S.B. 604 allows—and in some cases requires—the board instead to refer such initial investigations to the Division of Arkansas State Police, which is then required to investigate the complaint, without first independently evaluating the complaint's merits (States United Democracy Center 2021). Drutman explains that such laws give more control to partisan state legislatures, and in some cases even give them the ability to give the state electoral votes to the candidate that did not win the state. He argues, "had state legislatures been vested with more of these powers in 2020, they may well have used them to override decisions by nonpartisan election administrators and secretaries of states. As fights over election law continue to play out, many observers are wondering exactly how far elected Republicans will go" (Drutman 2021, 6).

State legislators not only used the momentum of the Big Lie to introduce harmful pieces of legislation, but they also retaliated against state election officials who said that Biden fairly won the 2020 election. Nevada Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, both Republican, were censured by their respective state party

committees after certifying the votes for President Biden (Drutman 2021, 4). The State of Georgia went so far as to pass a law removing Reffensperger from his position as Chair of the State Election Board, replacing him with someone chosen by the state legislature. That same legislation gave the board authority to suspend county election officials, including in heavily democratic counties such as Fulton County (Hasen 2022, 279). The lengths to which some state legislatures went to try to undermine President Biden's victory demonstrates the shift in the Republican party to extremist views of electoral fraud, "Given the new Republican orthodoxy of a stolen 2020 election, it is no wonder that false claims of voter fraud costing Republicans election victories have spread beyond President Trump. Other Republican politicians preemptively and without evidence have raised claims of stolen elections before polls have even closed" (Hasen 2022, 281).

REGIONAL BREAKS IN THREATS TO ELECTION OFFICIALS

The threats to election officials cannot be perceived as nationally uniform. Rather, there is clear regional variation in election denialism (Brennan Center Data). The manifestation of the Big Lie- protests of "corrupt elections," ensuing state legislation, widespread conspiracy theories, and physical violence- has not impacted all election workers equally. Types of threats, perceived threats of violence, and fear among election officials vary in different regions of the country.

My data in this section and the next two sections comes from a study conducted by the Benenson Strategy Group for the Brennan Center for Justice. Their online survey includes 596 interviews from January 3, 2022, to February 14, 2022, among local election officials across the country and of all political affiliations. Election workers from different regions in the country were asked about their experiences running an election during the height of the Stop the Steal

movement and the subsequent rise in attacks on their profession. The survey provides data by region: Northeast, Midwest, and South and West. The results show that there are clear differences in how election officials are experiencing election denialism in different parts of the country. The South and West tend to see the highest number of threats and violence experienced by election workers and expressed fear among election workers. Data shows the Midwest region experiencing less violence than the South and West but higher than the Northeast (Brennan Center Data).[6] The "Big Lie" has become somewhat of a rallying call for the far right.

Harassment of local election workers has become prevalent in a variety of ways – being assaulted or harassed at home, assaulted, or harassed on the job, harassed over social media, harassed over the phone, or having a family member or loved one be threatened or harassed. According to the data from the Brennan Center, 17 percent of election officials have indicated that they have been threatened in their job, including 12 percent from the Northeast, 16 percent from the Midwest, and 28 percent from the South and West. This data is significant, especially in the South and West regions where over a quarter of surveyed election officials affirm that the online threats have manifested into personal, individual experiences of violence for them. We can see the breakdown of modes of threat that election workers are experiencing in Figure 1. The data is further divided up among the three regions.

[6] While there is variance among the data, resulting in some results showing the Northeast region experiencing increased threats or decreased retention rates compared to the South and Midwest regions, the South and West saliently have the highest amount of threat, followed by the Midwest, then the Northeast.

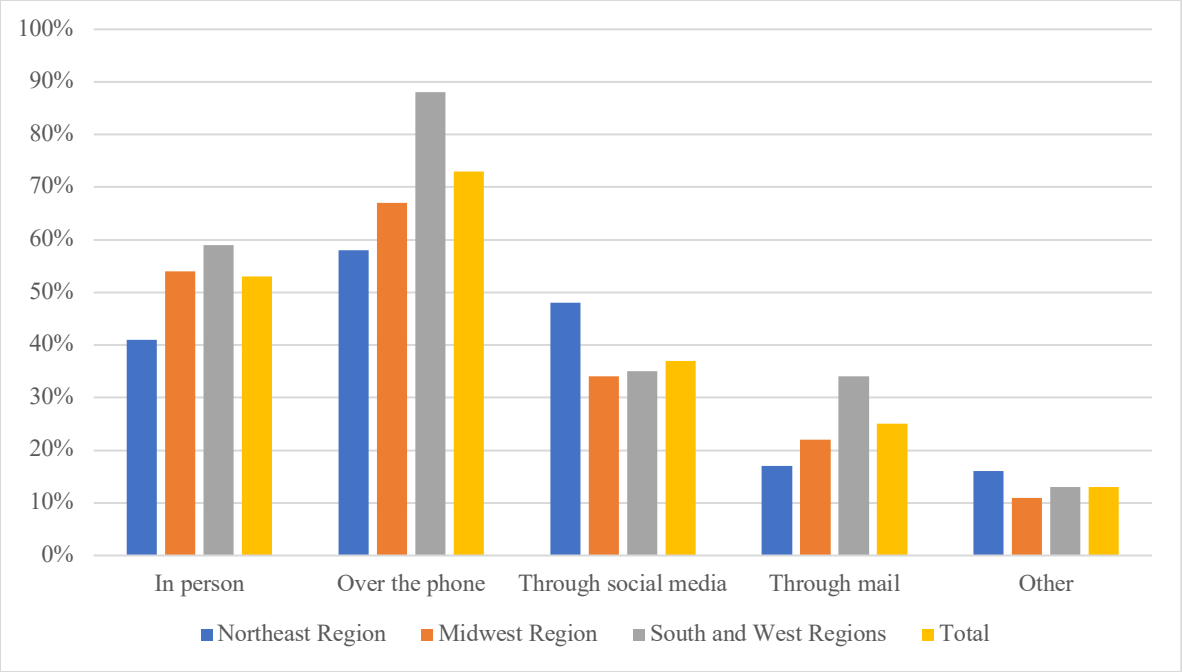

Figure 1: Modes of Threat

The results are compelling in two ways. First, they provide a visual representation of how the Big Lie is manifesting differently in the three separate regions studied. Each form of threat is experienced at different amounts in different locations. Second, election workers are faced with such extreme forms of election denialism that they are being threatened or assaulted in nearly every mode of communication. Figure 1 demonstrates that election workers in the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath were assailed for doing their jobs.

The plethora of documented physical and verbal attacks of election workers has undermined local election officials' confidence in their safety and ability to do their jobs. Workers who fear assault and harassment, of not only themselves but also their families and loved ones may be at greater risk of leaving their posts. Election officials and the role they play in the actual administration of elections are essential to the fabric of our democracy. This would leave the U.S. election system crippled. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of election officials

who responded "somewhat or very concerned" that they might be subject to assault or harassment.

Election officials in the South and West are more fearful of being assaulted or harassed than their counterparts in the Midwest, and especially than their counterparts in the Northeast. However, the data for every one of these categories shows that there are significant numbers of election officials who fear assault or harassment. Over a quarter (28 percent) of election officials in the South and West regions fear being assaulted at their homes. The gravity of this situation cannot be understated.

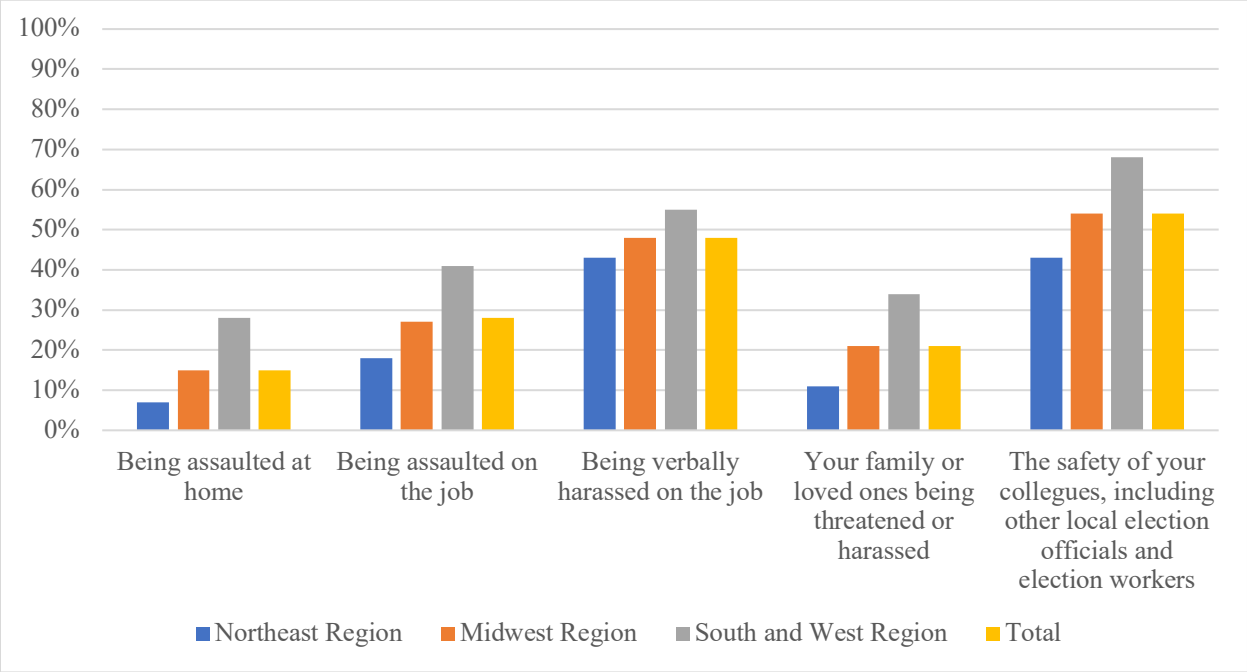

Figure 2: Percentage of Local Election Officials "Somewhat/Very Concerned" of Being Assaulted or Harassed

ELECTION DENIALISM AMONG 2022 MIDTERM CANDIDATES

The shift towards institutional acceptance of the Big Lie has engendered candidates running for office in the 2022 midterm elections to openly deny the results of the 2020 presidential election. In Arizona, the Republican nominees for Governor and Secretary of State

were both proud election deniers (and both endorsed by President Trump). Republican Gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake repeatedly claimed that the 2020 election was stolen, saying that she would not have certified the 2020 result and that "Joe Biden did not win." She went so far as to unsuccessfully sue to ban the voting machines Arizona uses, having alleged they are unreliable (Vandewalker 2022). Republican Secretary of State candidate Mark Finchem had made claims that Trump won the election and called for "decertifying" Arizona's election result. He filed a bill in the state house to decertify the 2020 county elections in Maricopa, Pima, and Yuma counties, claiming that there were 34,000 or 35,000 fictitious votes in Pima county in the 2020 election (Vandewalker 2022). In Nevada, Republican Secretary of State nominee Jim Merchant was quoted saying "it's almost statistically impossible that Joe Biden won." Merchant believes that Trump won the election and has called for an election audit in each state (Vandewalker 2022). Each one of these nominees lost their races in their respective states, showing some hope that voters are holding the middle and rejecting extremists' views of stolen elections.

Just because these candidates lost, however, does not mean the structural and institutional threat of the Big Lie is nonexistent. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, for example, overwhelmingly won re-election in the 2022 midterms but went on record casting doubt if Biden fairly won the 2020 presidential election: As of June 2022 when he was asked at a press conference, DeSantis still would not say if he believes President Joe Biden was "duly and legally elected" in 2020 (Vandewalker 2022). In May, DeSantis nominated State Rep. Cord Byrd (R) as Florida's Secretary of State. At a press conference, Byrd refused to answer whether the [2020] election was stolen. Speaking about the nomination and election security, DeSantis said, "we're certainly not going to allow political operatives to harvest all these votes, and then dump them

somewhere" (Vandewalker 2022). While politicians that were more blatant with election denialism may not have won in this most recent election cycle, the Big Lie has empowered politicians to cast doubt upon the integrity of election administration and the validity of any given election result.

Election denialism encouraged by local and national politicians has created a very really sense of unrest and fear among election officials. This fear has permeated beyond worry for one's own safety- or the safety of their colleagues or family members- to worry surrounding the integrity of elections in general. The rhetoric espoused by politicians like DeSantis or candidates like Finchem or Lake poses a legitimate threat to political influence over election results. According to the Brennan Center survey, 53 percent of election officials reported being somewhat or very concerned that incoming politicians will believe that there was voter fraud in the 2020 election. Figure 3 shows that this fear is highest among election officials in the South and West Region and lowest in the Northeast.[7]

The data also shows that 18 percent of election workers are concerned that they will face pressure to certify election results in favor of a specific candidate or party.[8] While this number may appear to be small, I argue that it is significant. The foundation of our election system, and American democracy writ large, relies on popular sovereignty. One of the only mechanisms to hold representatives accountable is through elections. Therefore, 18 percent of election officials reporting that they are concerned about facing pressure to certify election results to a specific

[7] It is not surprising that Northeast election officials have the lowest concern that incoming politicians will lean into theories of voter fraud or election denialism. Of all regions, the Northeast had the lowest number of election denier candidates run and win state seats.
[8] It is notable that a higher percentage of election officials in the South and West are concerned that incoming election officials might believe there was voter fraud in the 2020 election but a higher percentage of election officials in the Midwest are concerned they will face pressure to certify election results in favor of a specific party.

candidate or party, unlawfully and undemocratically overruling the people's choice, is extremely alarming.

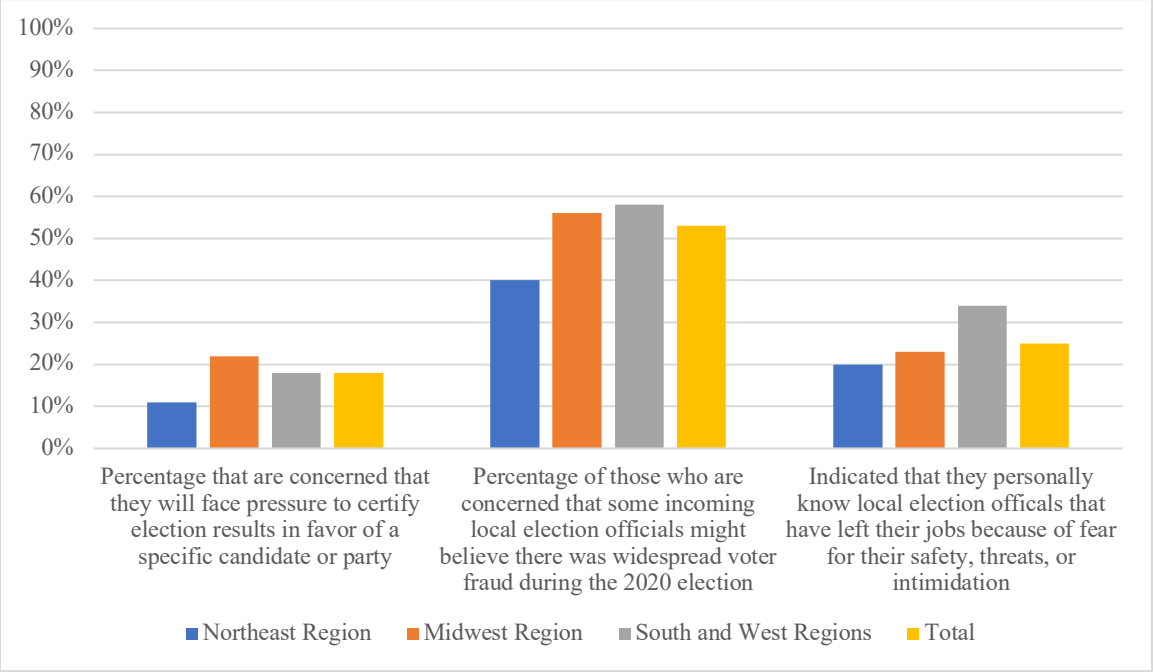

Figure 3: Damaging Effect to Election Integrity

Popular sovereignty is able to function only if there is a functioning structure in which people can vote and effectively form a government. Election officials that are worried for their safety, being threatened by citizens, and facing pressure from lawmakers can burn out or find themselves too scared to continue. Figure 3 shows that a quarter of all election officials know at least one or two election officials who left their jobs because of fear. South and West election officials have the highest number of colleagues that have their posts due to fear of threat at 34 percent, in contrast to 23 percent in the Midwest and 20 percent in the Northeast. If retention of election officials reaches a high enough threshold, there will be a momentous ripple effect on the entirety of the election system.

Election denialism has had a palpable effect on election officials and their confidence in election administration. This concern and the experience of the extreme belief that the 2020

election was rigged has forced some election officials out of their jobs. Protecting popular sovereignty and the safety of election officials is currently fragile and is at risk to only keep increasing. There have already been cases in which this ripple effect has had an effect on election administration. Gillespie County, Texas, for example, had all of their election workers step down in August of 2022, just months before the midterm election (Davies et al. 2022).[9] The elections administrator, Anissa Harris, cited the reason for stepping down as: "The threats against election officials and my election staff, dangerous misinformation, lack of full-time personnel for the elections office, unpaid compensation, and absurd legislation have completely changed the job I initially accepted" (Davies et al. 2022).

INCREASE SINCE 2020

Fear that political leaders will interfere in how election administrators do their jobs was much higher after the 2020 election than before. Figure 4 illustrates the dramatic change in fear that political leaders will impede election administration before and after 2020. About a quarter of all election officials surveyed indicated that they were "very/somewhat worried" of political leaders influencing election administration, with the highest percentage in the South and West regions. Following the 2020 election, this number has skyrocketed to 63 percent of election officials nationally. Surprisingly, we see the highest percentage of worried election officials in the Midwest after the election, with 69 percent reporting that they are somewhat/very concerned

[9] Trump won the 2020 presidential election in Gillespie County by 79 percent of the vote. Despite this, voters in this county were convinced that there was widespread fraud in the election. Election officials in this county were threatened in person, on social media, received death threats, and had been stalked (Vigdor 2022). The state was left scrambling, and the Secretary of State's office needed to send in trainers to make sure the election was still able to run.

while 60 percent of officials in the South and West report that they are somewhat/very concerned.

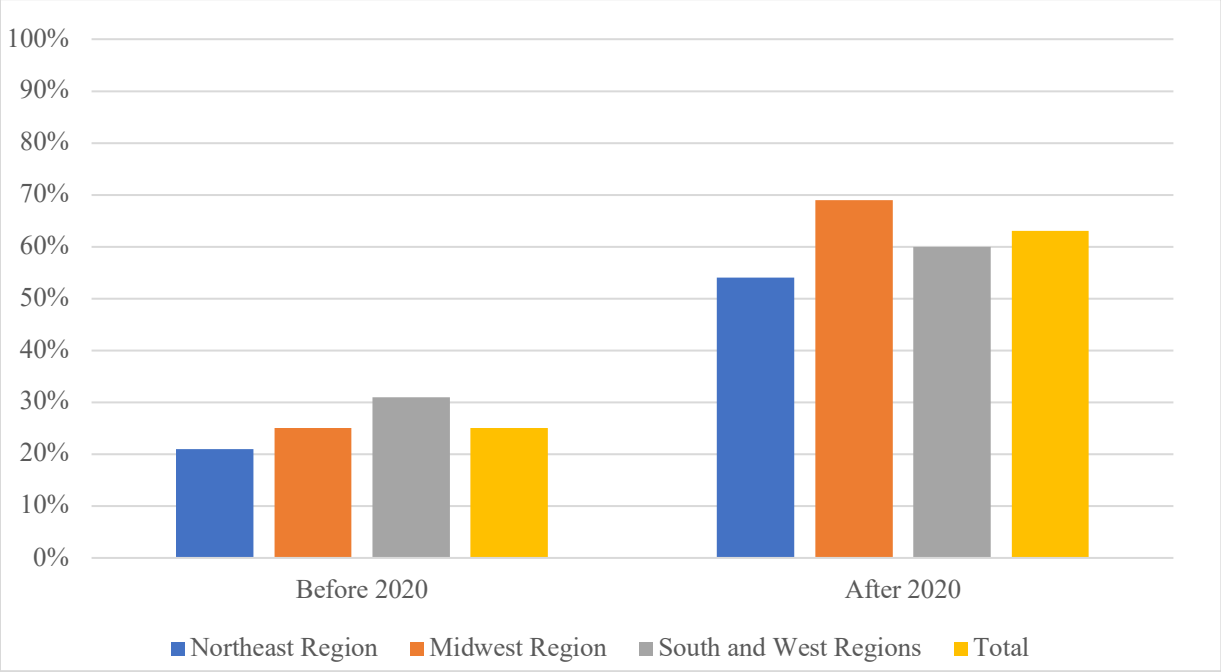

Figure 4: Fear that Political Leaders Will Interfere with how Elections Officials do Their Job

The increase in the fear that political leaders will meddle in how election officials conduct their job is not unfounded. The most infamous example occurred when President Trump asked Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to appear with the exact number of ballots that he lost the state by. On a recorded phone call between the two men, Trump is quoted saying, "All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have because we won the state" (Gardiner and Friozi 2021). This type of request is compelling because a request like this, from the most prominent politician in the country, opens the door for state and national politicians to use their power and popularity to sway election results. The outcry following Trump's request to have over 11,000 votes magically appear seemed to follow expected partisan lines.

Election denialism and its prevalence in our political culture in recent years is demonstrated below in Figure 5.

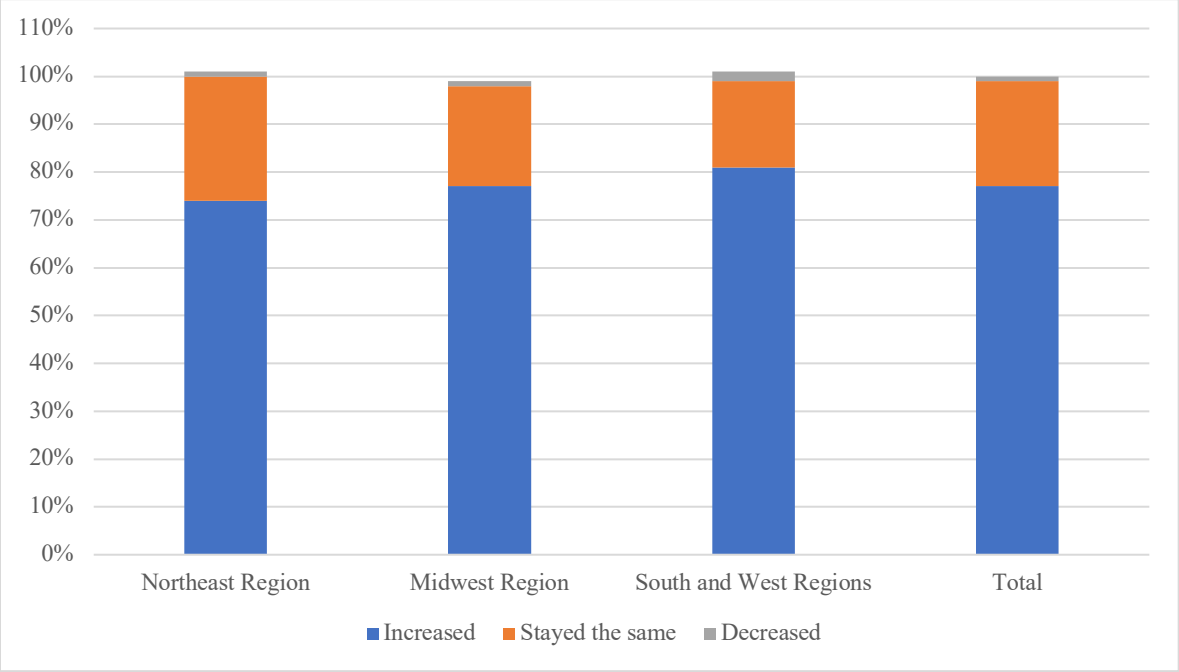

Figure 5: Election Officials' Perception of Threat in Recent Years

Election workers in every region across the country report that the threat against them has increased in recent years. Each region in the country had over three-quarters of election officials report that the threat has increased in recent years. The highest percentage reporting increased threat, at 81 percent, was in the South and West. The lowest at 74 percent was in the Northeast Region, and the Midwest Region reported 77 percent. These numbers are reflective of how election officials have been experiencing manifestations of the Big Lie. The significance of this survey question, however, is that each region in the country has consistent responses. There is no clear regional divide surrounding the perceived increase in threat. Instead, this data shows a salient national increase in the belief that Trump was the rightful winner of the 2020 presidential election, the belief that elections across the country is rigged, and the violence that follows.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary claims of election fraud and election denialism have ties to the early 2000s, however current narratives of widespread election fraud were born with the Big Lie. The Big Lie has progressed from misinformation Trump would tweet out to his millions of followers to a legitimate threat to the degradation of democracy. This narrative has now contextualized modern-day elections in the U.S. as they are fraught with controversy, accusations of fraud, and refusal to accept election results. The Big Lie and its implications have become so powerful that it has substantial support from the Republican Party- both the voters and politicians. Among the many permutations the Big Lie has taken, it is affecting the confidence and trust of local election administration.

Local election officials must cope with manifestations of the Big Lie that have turned into violence, physical threats, and systematic attempts to take away agency from election officials and attempts to undermine the will of the voters. While increased threat is notable across the country, the South and West region consistently have the highest reported numbers. This has not only caused fear and decreased retention among election officials, but it has also undermined a sense of electoral integrity, even among officials. Officials fear an increase in incoming workers who believe there was fraud in the 2020 election, as well as worry that political leaders will interfere with elections in the future. While local election officials grapple with increased mistrust and violence, politicians across the country are running for office and fanning the flames of election denialism. As rhetoric of voter fraud becomes increasingly commonplace, I expect that election officials continue to report high levels of assault and harassment, fear, and institutional undermining of electoral integrity.

Chapter Three: State (De)Centralization of Election Law and Administration

The U.S. is a rare case among the world's democracies in its reliance upon sub-national governments for the administration of elections. The result is that no two states administer elections in the same way, and high variation exists even within states. The highly decentralized nature of American elections is baked into the history and constitutional design of this country, with the federal government leaving nearly all decision to the states. States often saddle individual localities with the responsibility of administering elections. There is little oversight from the federal government and high amounts of responsibility given to local officials. To this day, there is no national election commission to manage all aspects of federal elections.[10] Rather, there are over 13,000 local entities that do so (Pastor 1999).

In today's context, I hypothesize high levels of centralization in election administration will lead to higher levels of staff retention and recruitment amid violent threats and misinformation.[11] I test whether funding, training, and uniformity in voting and voter registration systems lead to higher resilience among election officials. I argue that administrative resources concentrated at the state level – funding for election expenses, mandatory training, and uniform voting procedure and voter registration – will provide election workers with enough assistance to adequately combat election denialism. Statewide funding and training measures will increase the capability to staff elections and prolong election official retention. This will, in turn, enhance the

[10] The Federal Election Commission is an independent regulatory agency of the United States whose purpose is to enforce campaign finance law in United States federal elections. It was created in 1975. The Election Assistance Commission, created with the passage of the Help America Vote Act in 2002, serves as a national clearinghouse and resource of information regarding election administration to support state and local election officials. Neither of the agencies has regulatory power over the administration of elections. These are the closest federal bodies the U.S. has to a commission that oversees elections.

capability to preserve election integrity. Statewide election procedures, training, and voting procedure provide local election workers with enough support that workers are well-equipped to deal with incoming threats. In decentralized states, the lack of funding will put the onus on individual local election offices to pay for security and combat misinformation. Varied voting procedure system leaves election administrators more vulnerable to accusations of voter fraud and mishaps with voting machines. Without state-level training for election workers, staff will be less prepared and confident in administering elections. Jurisdictions in what I call a "hybrid state" (a state that ranks in the middle of the centralization spectrum) will have moderate levels of resilience, however not quite as strong as centralized states. The lack of state-level funding for election administration leaves election administrators ill-equipped to acquire resources to combat misinformation and protect themselves.

This chapter provides a brief background on the history of decentralization in U.S. elections. I specifically highlight the passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 as a pivotal moment in modern election administration, as the federal government imposed increased regulation on elections. I explain in depth what it means for a state to be centralized, decentralized, and a mix between the two (what I call a "hybrid" state). I elaborate on my hypothesis that states with higher levels of centralization will have higher levels of resilience among local election officials. I then introduce my four case studies, detailing their election law and corresponding level of centralization.

BACKGROUND OF DECENTRALIZATION IN U.S. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Beyond a few enumerated regulations, there is little historical foundation of federal intervention in election administration. Since the founding of the U.S., the federal government has put the onus of administering elections on the states, "If you look up the federal constitution,

and look up anything about elections and voting. What you're going to find is very, very little. You are going to find that women can vote, you need to be 18 to vote, you cannot be denied the right to vote based on race, and every four years the electoral college decides who the president is" said former Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap. Up until the mid-twentieth century, states were generally free to run their election systems with little interference from the government (Hale et al. 2015, 55). The federal government did not impose any regulations, and individual states and localities implemented election rules as they pleased, regardless of the effect it would have on election integrity. However, as history shows, U.S. election administration has been non-conducive and resistant to overarching federal reforms

There were a select few federal reforms put in place during the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, the Apportionment Act of 1842 was passed to eliminate the general-ticket system in favor of the Congressional district and limited the number of seats in Congress for the first time. Additionally, the Presidential Election Day Act of 1845 set a federal uniform time for electors to vote for the President and Vice President (Springer 2014). However, reform on the federal level often came as a delayed response to state reform. One of the most significant examples of this is the introduction of the Australian ballot. States began to implement the Australian ballot after the 1884 president election. States adopted the Australian ballot as a response to rampant vote buying and corruption in elections (Wiggins 2020). The Australian ballot protected against vote buying and gave voters the privacy of selecting the candidate they supported without interference (Pastor 1999).[12] It was not until almost a century later in 1925

[12] The Australian "secret" ballot is a ballot that lists all approved candidates and their party's name onto an official ballot. The implementation of the Australian ballot was monumental because many state conducted their elections "via voce" (meaning voters would yell out the candidate they were voting for) or with a party ticket (Wiggins 2020).

that the federal government made the Australian ballot mandatory in all elections (Pastor 1999). The implementation of the Australian ballot is a perfect example of the fragmented nature of federal election administration and the heavy reliance on states to preserve electoral integrity.

Springer argues that the Populist and Progressive Movements during the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries helped prioritize election reform. The reforms of the 20th century brought in a new age of government intervention in election administration. In a wave of federal reforms in the first two decades of the 20th century, women's suffrage, the Australian ballot was implemented federally, direct election of U.S. senators through the passage of the 17th amendment, and ballot initiatives and referenda were instituted (Springer 2014, 3). These reforms, however, still did little to regulate the administration of elections. It wasn't until the second half of the 20th century that legislation was passed that began to bolster election administration and expand voter access. The passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 enabled the development of a national election administration network.[13] In the 1980s and 1990s, this network solidified into a platform of federal and local election officials and NGOs that are dedicated to working on election administration issues (Hale and Slaton 2008, 842).[14] The first

[13] The Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires states with a history of discriminatory voting laws to seek approval from the Department of Justice before any changes to their voting procedure are implemented. More specifically, Section 5 "was enacted to freeze changes in election practices or procedures in covered jurisdictions until the new procedures have been determined, either after administrative review by the Attorney General or after a lawsuit before the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, to have neither discriminatory purpose nor effect" (Department of Justice). Arizona is the only state in of case studies that qualified under Section 5, signaling a history of discriminatory voting legislation and practices. I draw attention to this because Arizona is the one state I study that may have had a stronger presence of federal oversight. While this oversight is related to election law changes, the preexisting response structures created by the Department of Justice may have allowed for increased political insulation to threats to election administrators. However, the preclearance process was suspended following *Shelby County v. Holder*, 133 S. Ct. 2612 (2013).

[14] The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) or the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), for example.

major reform was not until other laws like the National Voter Registration Act (1993) and the Help America Vote Act passed in 2002 (HAVA) followed suit and began to create a semblance of federal requirements in elections, instead of giving complete free reign to local jurisdictions (Creek and Karnes 2010, 278).

PASSAGE OF THE HELP AMERICA VOTE ACT

The passage of HAVA was an apex moment in American electoral history. The 2000 election, and all its technical problems, sparked a national debate on the ability of states to manage upkeep with voting practice, voting registration, ballot counting, ballot machinery, and election administration (Palazzolo 2005, 3) The enactment of HAVA implemented new guidelines and requirements about how states should administer elections (Palazzolo 2005, 12). The law required states to establish centralized statewide voter registration databases, consolidating the voter lists of its various counties and jurisdictions. It also provided funds for the replacement of voting equipment and the improvement of election administration (Underhill, 2018). Among the HAVA regulations, states had new voting system requirements to prevent overvotes, enhance audit capacity, improve accessibility for individuals with disabilities, provide alternative language accessibility, decrease error rates, and develop a uniform definition of what constitutes a vote. States also had new voter registration requirements. These included statewide registration lists and the implementation of registration by mail. HAVA included voting safeguards such as provisional ballots and information requirements about the location of the election and information on how to cast a ballot. There were also increased requirements regarding procedure and funding (Montjoy 2005, 25). The strategy was to make a single authority within each state accountable for key aspects of federal elections (Montjoy 2005, 17).

Despite those aims, the government hit challenges of implementation as each state, according to its level of centralization, enacted the new policies differently. Decentralized states resisted the changes as many state legislatures were concerned about raising “turf issues" (Montjoy 2005, 17). The passage of HAVA relied on states to implement federal funds and resources to individual localities. Montjoy refers to “turf issues” as a local resistance to government intervention in their own election administration. Both the federal and state government became increasingly involved in local election administration, local election administers had to grapple with resisting federal intervention and accepting much needed funds. While decentralization may speak more to the history of the electoral institution, centralized state election administration ensures that the deployment and implementation of resources is more seamless and effective in comparison to their decentralized and hybrid administration structures.

I use HAVA as an example of how states with centralized authority over elections could implement HAVA requirements at a higher rate than decentralized states. A study that compared states with varying levels of centralization (Maryland, Virginia, and New York) found that highly centralized states integrated HAVA requirements much faster than their decentralized counterparts (Creek and Karnes, 2010). A high level of centralization means states exercise authority over policy adoption and implementation at the sub-state level. The state will have extensive discretionary power over the execution of policy reforms. In a decentralized state, the local election administrators (e.g., county, township, municipality) make the decision about most of the policies and procedures concerning voter eligibility rules, how, when, and where voters cast their ballots, and what technologies will be used to support elections with minimal direction from the state (Election Administration and Voting Survey 2020 Comprehensive Report 2020; Creek and Karnes 2010, 278). Factors in varying levels of centralization mean that states have

different election laws over things like "state and local management of registration lists and polling places; county-by-county or even precinct-by-precinct variations in voting technologies, ballot designs, voter instructions, and vote counting standard" (Nussbaumer 2013, 392).

One of the strategies of HAVA was to make a single authority within each state accountable for key aspects of federal elections (Montjoy 2005, 17). Hale et al. describe this person as the chief election officer, CEO (Hale et al. 2015, 32). The CEO may be an individual or individuals such as the secretary of state, a town or county clerk, a state election commission, or a county board of elections (Nussbaumer 2013, 496). Depending on who the CEO is, there can be partisan and government centralization of state election law. CEOs can be appointed, directly elected by the people, or appointed by and serve under a board or commission (Hale et al. 2015, 33).

Another requirement by HAVA that contributes to classifying centralization is the uniformity of the state-wide voting system. By uniformity, I am referring to whether the state has the same type of voting equipment and in-synch procedures and requirements (Underhill 2018). In the case of uniformity, each jurisdiction in the state uses the exact same equipment for elections and uses the technology in the same way.[15] Highly centralized states may also dictate procedures and training for election officials to attend so that there is consistency from county to county (Underhill 2018).

[15] Dunlap on HAVA required centralized voter registration system: "Having that centralized registration system is a huge improvement. [Maine] went to a unified bid on tabulators. We used to have four different types of tabulators out there so the state had to produce almost 3,500 different ballot styles to accommodate all these different tabulators. Because you had senate districts, house districts, congressional districts, county commission districts, all of the different wards and precincts, you're one of a thousand different ballot styles."

The final metric is how states fund the running of elections. When HAVA was originally passed, it allocated $3 billion to states to help with the costs of updating election equipment. “While this number was well short of the costs associated with the needed electoral improvements, centralized states could aid their local districts which would be particularly helpful. Those states that employed second-order devolution would not be able to ease the resource cost of election reform for their localities'” (Creek and Karnes 2010, 280). Overall, the scholarship on election administration shows us how state centralization in election law impacted the implementation of HAVA.

CURRENT IMPLICATIONS OF VARYING LEVELS OF CENTRALIZATION

Each state's election administration structure and procedures grew organically over many decades as times changed and administering an election became an increasingly complex task (NCLS 2022). In some states, such as many in New England, cities and towns are responsible for running the election (Hale et al. 2015, 38). In other states, such as Delaware, the state is responsible for conducting every aspect of the elections (Shanton 2019, 7). Yet others, like Minnesota, have a mix of centralized and decentralized features (Shanton 2019, 10).

In this study, I classify centralization by which state entity is responsible for paying for elections, what type of training is provided to election officials, and if there is uniformity in voting procedure and voter registration procedure. Depending on where a state falls in each of these categories I classify it as centralized, decentralized, or a "hybrid" state. I hypothesize that higher levels of centralization correlate with higher levels of resilience among local election officials.

Centralized states take on more of the costs of policy implementation to ensure that election reform is not a burden on the localities (Creek and Karnes 2010, 279). The most effective networks appear to be more highly centralized and coordinated by a strong core organization that administers funding and operates in a stable, resource-rich environment under government fiscal controls that are direct rather than fragmented (Hale and Slaton 2008, 840). Having state-run training in election processes, uniform voting systems, and overseers of election technologies should protect election workers more in centralized states.

In comparison, I expect that decentralized states will have a harder time coping with threats to election integrity because they do not have the capacity to investigate or available funds to deal with incoming (dis)information. Since the 2020 election, local election officials

have been dealing with an onslaught of record requests (Mistler 2022). This influx of records requests comes from far-right activists who believe that Trump won the 2020 election and are inundating local election officials with record requests in states across the country. The requests appear to be identical to those distributed on obscure social media sites frequently used by Trump supporters (Mistler 2022). The work to respond takes time and resources away from actual election administration. In decentralized states, election officials cannot rely on funding, increased staffing, or even training to adapt to new election conspiracy theories.

I expect hybrid states to fare better than decentralized states, as hybrid states can access more state funds and have uniform voting systems that can provide shield against claims that voting machines rigged the election. That being said, hybrid states do not provide as much protection against forms of election denialism and threat to electoral integrity as states that can be staffed, trained, and funded at the state level.

There is some argument, however, that decentralized election structures provide more agency to individual election workers dealing with misinformation. Decentralization may be the best policy option in states with very heterogeneous populations because local election administrators have the local expertise and will know their electoral needs better than people sitting in the state capital (Creek and Karnes 2010, 279). In these cases, urban and rural districts will be able to implement different strategies in coping with election misinformation or threats. Increased agency among election officials could lead to an increased ability to combat attacks on election workers and election administration. In addition, "running elections at the local level means that each clerk is responsible for a smaller number of voters. This can make it easier to ensure that registration lists are accurate (Huefner 2007, 114). While these are worthy arguments, I argue that decentralized states leave these resources in the hands of individual localities who

cannot provide them as robustly as state governments can. I believe that a lack of funding, training, and uniformity in procedure will hinder resilience among local election officials in decentralized states.

CASE SELECTION AND METRICS TO DETERMINE CENTRALIZATION

In order to evaluate the effects of centralization on the resilience of election officials, each state is categorized on a scale of zero to three, with zero as the most decentralized and three the most centralized. The coding for these states assigns points based on if the state qualifies as centralized for each metric. Each of the metrics can provide up to one point and as little as .25 points. Nevada is the only state that is categorized as a zero, however, California, New York, and Utah all rank at .5. These states nearly have a completely decentralized system, receiving almost no points for each mechanism of centralization. Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, and New Mexico are all on the other side of the spectrum with a ranking of three and the highest level of centralization. While highly decentralized and centralized states represent the extremes of the centralization spectrum, the majority of the state's distribution range between one and two. The Appendix provides the point breakdown for each state and their corresponding level of centralization.

The four states I have chosen are New Mexico (3), Colorado (2), Arizona (1), and Nevada (0).[16] All four states have similar population size, demographics, and partisan makeup.[17]

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[16]Arizona's centralization ranking is .75. However, for the purposes of this study, I am rounding up to assign Arizona a 1 on the centralization scale. For complete coding, see Appendix.

[17] In 2021, New Mexico's population was 2.12 million. Colorado's population was 5.12 million, Arizona's population was 7.28 million, and Nevada had a population of 3.14 million (U.S. Census Bureau. While their population range between some states, say Arizona and New Mexico is significant, all states generally fit into the midsize category. Each state has similar racial demographics. New Mexico's population is 35.9 percent white, 50 percent Hispanic or Latino, 11.2 percent American Indian, 2.7 percent black and 1.9 percent Asian. Colorado's population is 67 percent white, 22.3 percent Hispanic or Latino, 1.4 percent American Indian, 4.7 percent

In addition, and importantly for this study, these states are centered in the area of the country with the most significant election denialism.[18] According to data provided by the Brennan Center for Justice, out of all regions in the U.S., the South and West regions faced the highest number of incidents of election threat, assault, and harassment of election workers. Election officials in this region consistently reported higher levels of a perceived threat than any other part of the country. Lastly, the emerging data showed that the South and West regions had the highest amount of election officials (34 percent) reporting to know colleagues who left their positions due to threats, harassment, and intimidation (data on file with author). Analyzing case studies in the region of the country that is facing the highest amount of election denialism allows for a result that will provide the clearest picture of whether centralization in election law leads to increased resilience among election officials amid threat, assault, and harassment.

In Table 1, I include the metrics I use to rank the level of centralization for the four states I examine. They are described in more detail in the coming sections. The first qualification is who pays for elections. Does the state pay for conducting elections? This can include all elections, only primary elections, only special elections, only elections with only state candidates on the ballot, or the counties fund elections.[19] Additionally, the funding of election supplies and salary of election workers may be funded solely by the state, partially by the state, or the counties/municipalities may be responsible for bearing the entire cost.

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black, and 3.6 percent. Arizona's population is 53.2 percent white, 32.3 percent Hispanic or Latino, 5.3 percent American Indian, 5.4 percent black, and 3.8 percent Asian. Nevada's population is 46.6 percent white, 29.9 percent Hispanic or Latino, 1.7 percent American Indian, 10.6 percent black, and 9.1 percent Asian (U.S. Census Bureau).

[18] See Regional Break in Threats to Election Officials section.

[19] See Appendix for detail on coding and description of coding decisions.

The second metric is the type of training that election workers undergo prior to elections. Some states provide yearly mandatory training, other states provide a certification process in which the Secretary of State will certify election officials that have completed a course or training but are not being trained directly by the Secretary of State's office. Other, more decentralized states provide voluntary training. Lastly, some states just provide a handbook with election administration instructions and information. In the last case, the counties/municipalities are responsible for providing training to their election workers.

Lastly, I analyze the uniformity in voting procedure and voter registration. Centralized states, for example, have one type of voting machine and voting technology used throughout the state. In a decentralized state, each county/municipality chooses its own type of voting system and procedure, thus there is not uniformity throughout the state. Additionally, many states conduct a "top-down" voter registration process. Some states have a single, central platform at the state level that collects voter registration and subsequently connects to terminals in local jurisdictions. Other states implemented a state voter registration database that gathers and aggregates information from their local jurisdictions' voter registration databases. This type of system is typically referred to as a "bottom-up" system (Election Administration and Voting Survey 2020 Comprehensive Report, 2020). The state is clearly handling and centralizing the process of voter registration with the top-down voter registration system, while in a bottom-up state, the counties/municipalities are responsible for doing so and then relaying the information to the state.

Table 1: Metrics of Centralization and Categorization of Case Studies

State	What the state pays for	Types of training provided	Uniform voting procedure and voter registration procedure
New Mexico, 3	The state pays for almost all election expenses. The state pays for voting equipment through state appropriations. The state reimburses the counties for election costs	The state provides mandatory training	Both systems are uniform throughout the state. New Mexico uses a top-down voter registration system
Colorado, 2	State pays for nearly all elections federal or state. The state reimburses the county for certain local elections	Secretary of State's office provides a training to certify election officials	There is a non-uniform voting system, and each county can select which equipment to use. Colorado uses a top-down voter registration system
Arizona, 1	State pays for statewide primary and presidential primary elections. The state reimburses counties for presidential primary elections	The state offers voluntary training	There is a non-uniform voting system, and each county can select which equipment to use. Arizona uses a hybrid voter registration system
Nevada, 0	Counties are responsible for funding all elections, and both state and local	State does not provide a training program for local election officials but may publish digests, handbooks, or compilations of election laws	Each county has a different voting procedure. Nevada uses a bottom-up voter registration system

WHAT THE STATE PAYS FOR

The funding for elections can become quite nuanced- most elections in most states are not clearly funded by the state or directly by the counties. A state may provide partial funding to an election or provide funding to just statewide elections and not local elections. The same could be true between counties and municipalities as some state's counties can be responsible for funding all municipal elections, the municipalities may bear the entire cost, or there is a mix between municipal, county, and even state funds. New Hampshire provides a good illustration of this; the state pays for all state-wide elections (this means all elections for candidates for state office, or any federal election). The state funds and provides ballots and all election supplies.[20] The localities, however, pay for all supplies and materials for local elections.

In contrast, in Indiana, select municipalities and counties have agreements on funding elections. In that state, counties sometimes bear the brunt of the local election costs, but municipalities may be charged by the county for the odd number years when municipalities run elections (Ind. Code §3-5-3-1). Because funding is often not solely allocated at the state level, it can be difficult to identify the complete cost of elections. "We would estimate that a statewide election would cost somewhere north of a million dollars," says former Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap.[21] The caveat in Maine, according to Dunlap, is that "towns never really knew. You had all of your town office employees working at the polls, they are on salary anyway. So, breaking out that cost of the elections is a little difficult. It's easier to break out things like renting a gymnasium for a polling station and paying overtime. Those you can enumerate. Those other sub costs of employee time are tougher to enumerate."

[20] The localities pay for all voting equipment for all elections.
[21] This is not a generalized estimate of cost. States larger than Maine will have costs significantly higher than this.

These examples demonstrate that election funding is tied up in the nuances of decentralized election administration. The four case studies illustrate how centralized and decentralized states differ in the sources and use of election funds.

TYPES OF TRAINING PROVIDED

Training for all election officials is another aspect that can delineate a centralized state from a decentralized one. It is important to note that every state provides some type of training, ranging from publishing digests (like in New York or Nevada), providing voluntary training (such as in Idaho or Louisiana), the state certifying election officials (like in Montana or North Carolina), or the state providing mandatory training for all election officials (such as in Maine or Maryland). There has been a significant increase in state-provided training for election officials, with 32 states requiring training in 2016, compared to 21 in 2002 (NCSL 2022). Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows highlights the benefits of having mandatory training for all election officials, "uniformity and consistency across elections, and states can play a very important role in providing uniform, consistent expert training to local election officials, rather than every local election unit, whether that's a municipality in Maine, or a county in another state, having to reinvent the wheel." Election training at the state level guarantees that all election workers across the state will have the same knowledge on how to conduct elections. Secretary Bellows believes that the centralized training in Maine helps with uniformity and consistency of election administration, "In Maine, [The secretary of state] provides mandatory training for every clerk and registrar in the state every single year. That is extraordinarily important so there's a shared understanding of what policies are governing elections [across the state]. I think that the state centralization of some of those functions, improves the consistency of uniform application of state law across all municipalities."

Each of the case studies has some form of training provided to their election officials. The difference between centralized and decentralized states is at what level of administration is the training provided. In a state like Maine, for example, each election official is guaranteed to have the same exact training. This training is conducted and paid for by the Secretary of State. In a state that provides voluntary training, leaving it up to the counties to decide how their election officials are trained could lead to extremely varied knowledge and potentially inadequate training for officials. I argue that the metric of training has become especially important as election officials across the country are needing to adapt to a new normal of administration. If municipal offices are being bombarded with threats or accusations of misinformation, officials need to know the proper steps to cope. As a response to threatening violence experienced by election workers in Maine, the secretary of state offered a new de-escalation training for all municipal clerks. The training, in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the Department of Homeland Security's operational component, CISA, officially known as the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency is designed to give clerks knowledge on how to de-escalate a hostile situation.

The centralization of election administration in Maine allows for clerks across the state to find resources and support amid rising denialism and violent threats, "There are consequences for people who would seek to disrupt the elections process and we can educate the public to reduce the amount of disinformation that is sometimes generating those threats at the same time across the nation," said Bellows.

UNIFORMITY OF VOTING PROCEDURE AND VOTER REGISTRATION PROCEDURE

Uniformity in voting systems and voter registration systems is one of the most salient ways to judge centralization. Some states use voting machines in which you use the machine to mark your vote, voting tabulators where you mark your vote on a ballot which is then processed, and some localities have remained hand counting paper ballots (Election Administration and Voting Comprehensive Survey 2022). To make it more complicated, there are different types of voting machines and voting tabulators. All states certify the voting equipment to use. In a state with a uniform voting procedure, the state will certify voting equipment and every locality uses that equipment. In a state with a non-uniform voting procedure, each locality can select which voting equipment to use.

Each state is required by HAVA to have a centralized voter registration list. Dunlap says that this change in Maine was significant, as the state went from having over 500 different voters lists to just one.[22] One of the difficulties of the decentralized voter lists, according to Dunlap, was that "the old voter files is that someone would pass away and that nobody would know. They would stay on the lists for years. HAVA changed all that, it made the [the central voter registration system] a dynamic, living document." Today, the difference between a centralized

[22] "Before HAVA in Maine, every town had their own voter lists. They were all different. You had a lot of small towns where the clerk just typed everything up on a piece of paper. I remember I was doing candidate recruitment at one point when I was in the legislature. We were out getting signatures for a candidate, and we wanted to get a copy of the voter list. We went to this little town off route 9 and down to the town office. It was only open Mondays and Thursdays 12-4 pm and it was the clerks living room. She had a voter list that was actually a notebook with the names of the voters written out in long hand and the deceased crossed out in red. And she just hands it to us and says, "bring it back when you're done, dear." And I was like, and I was like "you're freaking giving us this thing?" And she said, "I know you'll bring it back; I can trust you," Dunlap said as he recounted what it was like to have unstandardized voter lists in Maine before HAVA.

voter registration system in a centralized state and a decentralized state is a "top-down," "bottom-up," or hybrid voter registration system. Centralized states retain all of the voter registration information at the state level and share it will all counties and municipalities. Counties and municipalities, in decentralized states, retain all of their voter registration information and subsequently share it will the state's central voter registration system. A hybrid system combines these two processes. For example, Texas has 254 counties and 215 of the counties use the Texas statewide voter registration database directly to manage their voter registration data and elections. An additional 39 Texas counties manage their own voter registration data using a third-party vendor. The data from these 39 counties are processed with the state database every night so that all database changes between the state system and each county can be reconciled (Election Assistance Commission 2017). Currently, 35 states use a top-down voter registration system, six states use a bottom-up system, and six states use a hybrid system. North Dakota is the one state that does not have to maintain a voter registration list or database. However, they do have a list of previous voters (Election Assistance Commission 2017).

INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES

New Mexico serves as the state with the highest level of centralization. While local election officials in New Mexico still retain agency, they can also rely on the state government for funding, training, and centralization of voting and voter registration processes. In New Mexico, the state legislature uses appropriations to fund voting equipment for all elections (State of New Mexico Executive Budget Recommendations 2023). The state reimburses the county for all election-related costs. Robyn Holmes, the County Clerk of Otero County reports that she always budgets for election expenses, but the state consistently reimburses the county. The state

provides mandatory training through the Secretary of State's office (Underhill 2018). New Mexico elections are conducted using paper ballots that are scanned on Dominion Voting System's optical scan tabulating system uniform voting system across the state. This is consistent throughout the state (New Mexico Secretary of State). New Mexico uses a top-down central voter registration system. The state exemplifies centralization in all metrics used.

Colorado maintains aspects of centralization, especially in how the state funds all elections. For local elections, the state reimburses counties for all election costs if the only item on the ballot is a statewide ballot issue. For any other election where there is a statewide ballot issue/question on the ballot, the state reimburses at 90 cents per active registered voter in counties with 100,000 or fewer active registered voters, or 80 cents per voter in counties with more than 100,000 voters (Underhill 2018). Additionally, the secretary of state's office conducts training and certifies local election officials. In order to be certified, election officials must attend web-based trainings, completing at least one course in person every four years (Election Rules 8 CCR 1501-1). While there is a standard for training established by the secretary of state, web-based trainings that are conducted once every four years. This cannot provide election officials with the most up-to-date ways to protect themselves to changing threats of election denialism nor does require that election officials are engaged in the training as an in-person training would.

The secretary of state currently has eight different voting machines approved for use in Colorado, four of them used by the localities. 24 counties use the Dominion Standard (ICX/ICC), 37 use Dominion Express (ICX/ICC), two use the Clear Ballot (Clear Access/Clear Count), and one uses the Dominion Mini (ICX) (Colorado Secretary of State). Lastly, Colorado uses a top-down voter registration system. Colorado is given a coding of two because there are clear

demonstrations of centralization in election administration. However, inconsistent training and variation voting machines separate Colorado from the most centralized states.

In Arizona, the state pays for statewide primary and presidential primary elections. The state reimburses counties for presidential primary elections at the rate of $1.25 per active registered voter, though if the secretary of state determines that reimbursement at this rate would jeopardize the ability of a county to comply with federal and state laws the county may be released from that rate of reimbursement (Underhill 2018). The state provides the option to train local election officials. This training merely suggested for municipal clerks.[23] For those who choose to be trained, training is provided by the secretary of state in odd-numbered years, with training required in subsequent odd-numbered years to maintain certification (Arizona Municipal Clerks' Association). The Secretary of State's office is required to publish a manual an Election Procedures Manual at least 30 days prior to the election in order to prescribe rules to achieve and maintain the maximum degree of correctness, impartiality, uniformity, and efficiency on the procedures for early voting and voting, and of producing, distributing, collecting, counting, tabulating, and storing ballots (Arizona Municipal Clerks' Association). The secretary of state in Arizona certifies voting equipment, but it is up for the counties to select which voting equipment they use prior to an election. The voting machines that were used in the 2022 election cycle were E&S, Unisyn, and Dominion Voting machines (Arizona Secretary of State). Lastly, Arizona uses

[23] The Certified Municipal Election Official designation was developed in 1993 by the Arizona Municipal Clerks' Association, in conjunction with the League of Arizona Cities and Towns, to provide training in the area of municipal election administration. At that time municipal clerks were not permitted to attend the election training provided by the Arizona Secretary of State's Office. While that has changed and municipal clerks are encouraged to attend the state training for an overall understanding of the election process, it was determined that training for municipal clerks is still important since the state law and training was directed at statewide, partisan elections (Arizona Municipal Clerks' Association).

a hybrid voter registration system (Election Assistance Commission 2017). Arizona is fairly decentralized, with aspects of centralization mainly relying on how elections are funded.

Nevada has a highly fragmented system for election administration and conducting elections. In Nevada, state laws vest the primary authority over election administration to county officials. As such, counties in Nevada pay for all elections and voting equipment. Nevada does not provide mandatory or even voluntary training for its election workers; it only provides a handbook with election worker information (Underhill 2018). Additionally, each county uses a different election management system. Information systems as well as guides available to voters vary from county to county (Penrose 2020). The type and model of the voting system also varies county to county. The seventeen counties are split between two types of systems, fifteen using Dominion Voting System and two using the Election Systems and Software (Nevada Secretary of State). Each county has the discretion to select the type of voting system in the absence of a state-level mandate of a uniform voting procedure. Nevada has a bottom-up voter registration system, which means that each of the state's 17 counties control, maintain and secure their own local voter registration databases, many of which are supported by different vendors. In any Nevada county, when a person registers to vote, their information is manually entered into a local voter registration database (Nevada Association of County Clerks and Election Officials 2021). The Nevada secretary of state then compiles all the records from each county to create a separate voter registration database (Election Administration and Voting Survey Comprehensive Report 2020).

CONCLUSION

Decentralization and state autonomy over election law is baked into both the historical and contemporary context of the electoral administration in the U.S. After the passage of HAVA,

states began to conform to a slightly more centralized system. States had to implement mandatory procedures of voting equipment, voter registration, uniform ballots, and allocation of federal funds. HAVA helped the state governments have some control over how elections in their states were conducted. Some states, such as New Mexico, concentrated nearly all election administration at the state level. States like Nevada followed implementation of HAVA while maintaining local-level control of elections and election administration. Other states, like Colorado and to some extent Arizona, found a middle ground in giving administrative authority to the state while also giving local election officials discretion, and sometimes the burden, of electoral processes.

These four states allow me to identify case studies within each one to compare whether jurisdictions in centralized or decentralized states can cope with misinformation, incendiary rhetoric, and violence against election workers. I expect election workers in New Mexico to cope with threats to election administration and election officials the best due to of the support local officials receive from the state. New Mexico election workers will have received funding for all equipment and supplies needed for elections and election administration, and the election officials can rely on mandatory training that will enable a uniform response to rising forms of election denialism and misinformation. The voting system is uniform which creates less opportunity for accusations of fraud. In both Colorado and Arizona, officials will still have an allotment of funding from the state, but less frequent and up-to-date training will lead to election administrators feeling isolated and less equip to protect themselves, more so in Arizona than Colorado. I expect election workers in Nevada to be affected by election misinformation and threat at the highest rate. Lack of funding, training, and uniformity in voter systems leaves individual election workers in Nevada vulnerable to high thresholds of threats without external

resources to combat them. I now turn to my case study analysis to examine the status of election denialism in each selected state as well as aspects of centralization or decentralization, that contribute to election official resilience.

Chapter Four: Case Study Analysis

The case studies selected for analysis – Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico – each represent a different level of centralization as determined by the metrics of funding for elections, training provided for election officials, uniformity in voting procedure, and the type of voter registration procedure, as discussed in the last chapter. Amid rising forms of election denialism, election officials across the country are finding it more difficult to do their jobs. This is leading to faster burnout and increased fear, so much so that one in five election officials say they are likely to quit before the 2024 presidential election, according to the Brennan Center for Justice (data on file with the author). I use my case studies and conversations with local election officials to examine if election officials' resilience to the Big Lie, harassment, and assault is affected by differing levels of centralization.[24] These four case studies were selected because they are in the geographic region that reportedly has the highest level of threat, assault, and harassment to election officials and the highest level of perceived fear by election officials.[25] Resilience is defined as the retention of election officials and the recruitment of new election staff.[26]

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[24] All of the election officials named in the thesis agreed to be interviewed and provided written consent for their quotations to be included in the thesis. The one election official that did not consent to being named has been made anonymous. In order to protect anonymity, the county that is examined for Arizona has been made anonymous. See Informed Consent section in the Appendix for more information and a list of guiding questions used in every interview.

[25] According to a survey conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice, election officials in the South and West region of the US experience the highest reported levels of threat and fear. This is followed by the Midwest region, then the Northeast region. See Regional Breaks in the Threats to Election Officials section.

[26] I use the retention of staff as one of my signifiers of the resilience of election officials. It is important to note that it is inevitable that a handful of election officials will leave their jobs in each county each year. There is not, however, a specific threshold that symbolizes normal or abnormal staff turnover. Otero County had one staff member leave and Adams County had only a few staff members leave. I classify both of these as normal staff turnovers that is not solely contributed to election denialism. However, the county studied in Arizona had every full-time

Within each state, I researched counties that had a presence of election denialism in their local politics. I ensured that each county selected had comparable demographics and populations. Otero County in New Mexico, Adams County in Colorado, the county examined in Arizona, and Elko County in Nevada all have a significant presence of threats to election integrity. Because each of their states has varying levels of centralization, these case studies will show how centralization impacts local election officials' resilience to election denialism.

I hypothesize New Mexico will have the highest staff retention among election officials and ease of recruiting new staff, followed by Colorado, Arizona, and lastly Nevada. I argue this because a centralized state means there is more support provided to election officials to combat misinformation and threats, such as high levels of funding, mandatory training, uniformity in voting machines across each county and municipality, and a voter registration system maintained by the state. These factors create a structure of support that election officials can rely on amid widespread election denialisms. I now turn to the background of each state and the corresponding county that was chosen.

I. NEW MEXICO

Due to New Mexico's high level of centralization, I expect election officials to have high resilience. The threat in New Mexico has remained heavily partisan as claims of both the 2020 presidential and 2022 midterm elections being stolen have led to violence. After losing the race for a state house seat in the 2022 midterm election, the Republican candidate, Solomon Peña, hired people to commit drive-by shootings at the homes of Democratic election officials and lawmakers in Albuquerque. Bernalillo County Commissioners Adrian Barboa, and Deb

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election official, except for one, leave and Elko County had 13 election officials leave. I consider both of these counties to have abnormal staff turnover.

O'Malley, and State Representatives Javier Martinez and Linda Lopez had gunshots fired into their homes (Yamat and Montoya Bryan 2023). Peña had claimed that the election was rigged, posting to social media "I dissent. I am the MAGA king," the day after the election (Yamat and Montoya Bryan 2023). Following the shootings, Republicans downplayed the idea that stolen election rhetoric had helped instigate the violence (Gardner et al. 2023). This partisan trend of lawmakers claiming that elections are rigged or that results should not be trusted has shown itself to be one of the greater threats from within New Mexico's election system.

In a heavily conservative county, Torrance County, local officials delayed the certification of the 2022 primary. When they met to consider certification of the election, angry residents greeted the three commissioners with screams and vitriol. As the visibly frustrated Torrance County commissioners indicated they were going to vote to certify their election, the audience shouted, "Shame on you," "cowards and traitors," and "Who elected you" (Montoya Bryan and Lee 2022). In Sandoval County, one lone commissioner refused to certify the primary results. Election denialism in New Mexico has been propagated by constituents and county politicians, alike. The barrage of conspiracy theories and attempt to not certify the election was also felt in Otero County. I turn there now.

I a. OTERO COUNTY

While Otero County has seen internal threats of election denialism, it is in the state with the highest level of centralization. The New Mexico state legislature provides funding for all election equipment through state appropriations, there is mandatory training provided to all election officials, each county uses the Dominion Voting System, and the voter registration procedure is top-down. I hypothesize that this high level of centralization could provide support

to election officials to deal with high levels of mistrust among voting machines and rigged elections, enabling higher levels of staff retention and recruitment.

Otero County, as of 2020, has 66,804 people with a median household income of $45,032. The county's ethnic breakdown is 47.6 percent White (Non-Hispanic), 27.1 percent White (Hispanic), 6.16 percent American Indian & Alaska Native (Non-Hispanic), 5.49 percent multiracial (Hispanic), and 4.96 percent Other (Hispanic). Otero County is heavily Republican. Donald Trump won the popular vote by over 61 percent in 2020. During the 2022 midterm elections, the Otero County commissioners decided not to certify their party's primary election results because they did not trust the Dominion voting machines used there. The County Commission later reversed this decision, but not before urging election officials to recount all the ballots by hand (Montoya Bryan and Lee, 2022).

These beliefs of fraud and mistrust of election systems are not only coming from the County Commission in Otero County but the election officials themselves. A County Commissioner in Otero County, Couy Griffin, was present on January 6 and then proceeded to work the 2022 election cycle (Montoya Bryan and Lee, 2022). The county is represented by Republican lawmakers, including County Clerk Robyn Holmes. Holmes has been working in the County Clerk's office since 1985. She was elected county clerk in 2004 and 2008, serving two terms and running again in 2016 and 2020.[27]

In 2020, she noticed a shift, "everybody looked up to [our office]. The Board of County Commissioners, just the whole elected staff, always was very favorable to us, and always trusted us because we were very transparent. Then, a little bit prior to the 2020 election, we did have a

[27] New Mexico State law allows for county clerks to serve two consecutive four-year terms. After those two terms, the clerk must wait four years until they can run again.

commissioner that jumped on the bandwagon with the Dominion Voting machines." Holmes notes that in 2020 a county commissioner, Couy Griffin, the very election official that was present on January 6, started claiming that the Dominion Voting machines were fraudulent.

Griffin became close with David and Erin Clements. The Clements have gained prominence in conservative circles for their claims of election fraud. David, a lawyer, and his wife, Erin, sent an unsolicited 241-page document outlining alleged election fraud to every election official in the state (Beale 2022). The Clements became associated with Griffin, a preacher, and began to sow distrust about the voting machines in Otero County. The Clements and Griffin had a following of around 100 people, according to Holmes. "In the big scheme of things, it's not like, most of our registered voters were on their side. But they were the loud ones," she said.

According to Holmes, the pushback she received concerned the voting machines, not the administration of the elections. People accused the county of having modems on their voting machines that would allow someone to call in and change their votes. Holmes says they did a recount of the last election, through a hand tally, and then ran those ballots through the tabulator. The votes were 100 percent accurate. Holmes says she has offered to invite those doubtful to come so she can explain the process to them, "but they just don't want to, they don't want to understand it, I guess because then they'd be wrong. So, they would just kind of talk over me, they wouldn't listen to what I had to say." Despite receiving nasty phone calls and emails, Holmes says she has always felt protected by the state, "I always had the support of the state. And they always have supported us. We have a state police office here where they always were aware of what was going on," Holmes says.

I b. RESILIENCE

Since 2020, only one person on Holmes' staff has left the office. While she attributes some of this to burnout from combatting election denialism, she says that this staff member had been ready to retire. She partly attributes the high staff retention to the close relationship she has built with her staff during her tenure in the clerk's office. The one staff member who left was swiftly replaced. Outside of the clerk's full-time office staff, Holmes admitted that finding enough poll workers proved to be a bit more challenging than in previous elections. "Getting poll workers has always been a bit of a struggle," says Holmes, "but it was a little bit more of a struggle for the 2021 election."[28] Holmes said they just had to keep calling people but ended up having all 16 voting convenience centers staffed, with some locations staffed with alternates. However, poll workers have told her that if the county switches to hand-counting ballots, they won't work anymore.

Another challenge that has presented itself in Otero County is that election officials are vulnerable to believing conspiracy theories about the Big Lie and Dominion voting machines. Holmes says that this became a reality as conspiracy theories regarding rigged voting machines began to spread with Clements and Griffin. Holmes recognizes that there are a couple of workers who are connected to election-denier groups. However, she takes an intentional approach to keep them on the staff, "We've continued to call them to work, because I want them to know the process and that we're not doing anything illegal." Holmes believes that the more transparent and welcoming she is to theories of fraud, the more she can prove herself with facts. "[I say] okay, question me. If you see something that doesn't look right to you, please let me know." Holmes

[28] New Mexico has municipal elections every odd numbered year for things like school boards, water districts, among others.

says that she will invite these poll workers to come into the office to certify a machine together. Those poll workers, however, typically decline the offer.

I c. CENTRALIZATION

Holmes highlighted how helpful centralization from every level of government in New Mexico has been in supporting election officials from every level of government. “I have been supported by myself and my staff, by our Secretary of State's office, by our State Senators, and State Representatives to the very umpteenth [sic]. They have been here every step of the way,” said Holmes. She puts particular emphasis on the funding that is provided to each county. While she always budgets for county election expenses, the state reimburses the county for almost all costs associated with elections.

The control of setting laws regarding elections is concentrated in the Secretary of State’s office. Because of this, the burden of creating election laws does not fall on individual election officials. This has provided a mechanism of defense for election officials in Otero County. Many of the Clements and Griffins’ followers have demanded that the laws in Otero County be changed by getting rid of voting machines, ballot drop boxes, and transferring to hand-counted ballots. “County commissioners don't make laws, they follow laws. And so here [Clements] is pushing these commissioners to break the law to pass laws that they have no authority to do,” says Holmes. New Mexico has some of the strictest voting laws in the whole country, according to Holmes.

Through the centralized voter registration system, the state ensures that all voters are properly registered, they supply the counties with ballots and provide barcodes to keep track of each ballot. Because the state has a contract with Dominion Voting Systems, establishes standards for voting machines, and provides each county with machines, the counties can deflect

calls to change the voting procedure. That is the state's jurisdiction, not theirs. As the Clements and followers were pushing rhetoric surrounding faulty and rigged voting machines, there was a layer of protection between Holmes and the election deniers. I argue that we can attribute this to the centralization of election administration at the state level. In a less decentralized state, in which counties have the liberty to decide which voting system they can use, there is increased pressure and increased vulnerability to election officials.

New Mexico county clerks are all closely connected, representing a high level of centralization. "We are a very tight-knit group," says Holmes, "and we have been for many, many years." Most of the clerks in New Mexico have been in their respective county offices for as long as she has. Holmes says there is an email group that all county clerks belong to and are communicating every day. They use this group to support one another. Holmes says she feels like most of the election officials in New Mexico would "have [her] back." The closeness of these county clerks is a clear example of how a centralized state provides support and protection to election officials leading to higher resilience.

I d. CONCLUSION

New Mexico has common mandatory training in which all county clerks congregate and form relationships, each county uses the same voting system and follows the same election procedure. All of these enable New Mexico to maintain local staff, combat misinformation regarding their election procedure, and use state resources to protect themselves from physical threats with more ease than the other counties examined.

Many counties do not feel comfortable inviting election-denier groups into their election sites. I believe that Holmes can do this because of how secure and supported she and her staff feel by the state. The high level of centralization in New Mexico not only allows for high levels

of retention among election staff and ease of recruiting new staff but there is also a larger capacity to allow election deniers access to elections. In a less centralized state, that is not provided with ample funding for all election staff, does not have mandatory training on all voting equipment, and has different voting machines from the next county, there would be less capacity to allow poll workers with ties to conspiracy theories to remain on staff.

II. COLORADO

Election officials in Colorado have faced some of the highest levels of threat in the country. Colorado was one of seven states listed by the FBI as having "unusual threats to election workers" (Boehm 2022). The threats that election officials are facing in Colorado are severe and violent. Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold said in March of 2022 that she had received 22 death threats just in one week (Kim and Birkeland 2022). The threats have been experienced across the entire state and caused many of the state's county clerks to reinforce their offices with new locks, walls, and bulletproof glass (Franz 2022). The internal threat to election administration seen in New Mexico is also occurring within local election staffs in Colorado. Carly Koppes, the County Clerk and Recorder in Weld County reported an influx of election workers in her county being tied to election denier groups. According to Koppes, 35 of the poll watchers she approved to observe June's primary election had ties to election-denier groups. She says the climate is making it hard to hire election workers, and those that are stepping forward to fill the gaps are coming with an agenda (Franz 2022).

As we will see from the following case study analysis, volunteer election officials pose an internal threat to election integrity. The state has quickly responded to this trend by crafting and passing legislation that is aimed at curbing insider threats such as election workers embracing conspiracy theories (Coltrain 2022). SB22-153, which requires new security measures for

election systems, and HB22-1273, which makes it a crime to threaten election officials or publish their personal information online to harass them, were signed into law in 2022. SB22-1533 specifically makes it a felony to tamper with voting equipment or knowingly publish confidential information about the system.[29] The rapid response from the Secretary of State's office and the State Legislature to institute a policy to protect election officials' safety and punish internal threats from election workers shows a coordinated system of support, or in other words, centralization.

II a. ADAMS COUNTY

While I do not expect Adams County to have the same extensive structures of support established in Otero County, I expect Adams County election officials to have relatively high levels of resilience, analogous to their centralization rating. Because the state provides support through funding and training, Colorado is ranked two on the centralization scale. Because of this ranking, I hypothesize that officials in Adams County have lower levels of resilience than officials in a state ranked a three on the centralization scale.

Adams County has a population of 522,140, as of 2021, with a median yearly income of $73,813 (Adams County Demographics). The racial breakdown of the population is 49.1 percent white (non-Hispanic), 26.8 percent white, 6.37 percent other (Hispanic), 6.22 percent multiracial (Hispanic), and 3.85 percent Asian (US Census Bureau 2022). The county was considered a "toss-up" in 2022 but consistently voted Democratic. Biden won the county with 57% of the vote in the 2020 presidential election (Politico 2022). Adams County, however, has a low rate of

[29] While not specifically named, this legislation was a response to Mesa County Clerk and Recorder, Tina Peters allegedly breaching her county's election system and accessing voting machine data. Peters is currently under indictment (Coltrain 2022). She ran for the Republican nomination for Secretary of State in 2022 but came in third in the Republican primary (Rose et al. 2022).

partisan affiliation among citizens. Just over a quarter of voters are registered Democrats, with a slightly smaller proportion being registered Republicans. Beyond that, 44 percent of citizens are unaffiliated with a specific political party (Politico 2022).

Since 2020, Adams County election officials have faced an onslaught of threats, harassment, and violence from those in their county that believe the election was rigged. Josh Zygielbaum was elected as county clerk six years ago and is in his second term in office. Zygielbaum, a former Marine and city council member dedicated his first term to increasing voter participation, increasing opportunity for those who are traditionally underserved to vote, and expanding civic education in public schools, among other efforts. He first noticed a shift in public opinion of election officials in 2016, as the presidential election gave rise to rhetoric about voter fraud. “What I've experienced and what the industry, if you will, has experienced is a bit of animosity and some tension,” says Zygielbaum, “we’ve had to spend a lot of time re-establishing ourselves as the trusted source of information,” Zygielbaum reports that this animosity has grown outside of the office, even between volunteer election officials and their neighbors they see at Starbucks or the grocery store.

The real threats and violence, however, began after the 2020 election and the two years following 2020. Zygielbaum says that the staff receives daily nasty, threatening, or condescending messages, “essentially verbal harassment over the phone or on social media from members of the public who thought that their selection for president was cheated.” He reports that this has calmed down slightly since the 2022 midterms, but it has not stopped his staff from preparing for any situation from an irate person to an active shooter coming into the office. Every time the County Clerk's office sends out a message to constituents, like an alert that their ballot is on the way, or that the office received their ballot, they get nasty messages back, “saying you

guys are all cheaters, you're all liars. They swear up and down. Some of its comical because the grammar is so bad. Others have responded back and said things like we'll see you on the battlefield." Last election there was a ballot delivered with a suspicious powder in it. "The FBI got involved. Hazmat was here. Law enforcement, medical support, and all that would deal with it to ensure that it was contained." He tells me that this kind of law enforcement presence was not necessary in prior elections. Adams County is working on acquiring an isolation tent for if something like this powder incident occurs again so that they can reduce exposure. Zygielbaum said this in a nonchalant manner, "that's sort of the nature of our business these days. We expect it and so we train and prepare for it."

He seems resigned to the fact that the intensity around the big lie becomes more amplified around elections, "I do anticipate it will pick up as the presidential cycle for the election starts to gain steam here over the next few months," says Zygielbaum. He said people have followed him home from the office to his neighborhood. In addition, there are individuals who stand out at ballot drop boxes or centers who've been armed, individuals who are sitting in a car filming people going up and dropping off their ballots and taking videos of their license plates. While there has yet to be an incident with someone coming in with a gun to their office, "it is not out of the question," says Zygielbaum. Zygielbaum tells me that there have been a couple of incidents at the secretary of state's office in Denver where people who have been armed have tried to get in. He reports that there was an election worker in another county who, in the last election, threatened to shoot any of the black or brown people who were trying to vote. Zygielbaum says that these incidents are enough of a concern, that even with increased physical security to protect against it, "it's been enough that during election season and much of the year I'll wear a bulletproof vest to work."

II b. RESILIENCE

Zygielbaum acknowledges that the increase in threat has burdened his staff. He says that the first thing many election workers ask him when they sign on is how his office is going to protect them. He does believe that some of this can be attributed to COVID-19 and running an election during a pandemic. The combination of COVID and pressure from those who believe in the Big Lie affected both temporary and full-time staff. Zygielbaum says, “Initially, it was definitely very stressful. When we have active shooter training, that really brings home for people what the threats really are and what could happen. It adds quite a bit of stress.” However, Zygielbaum says that his staff has become desensitized. “I think that the team adapted and almost got used to it desensitized in a way.” Zygielbaum attributes his staff’s resilience to the policy and procedures that the state puts in place, which, as I argue in the following section, is because Colorado is a relatively centralized state.

In the Adams County Clerk's office, there are about ten full-time employees. There were only a few members of Zygielbaum’s full-time staff that left the office. When I asked him if any of the full-time staff members left their jobs because of the threats and harassment they were receiving daily, he said no. He reported that a few of his staff did end up leaving but “it was not necessarily directly because of the threat increase, they were just looking to do something else.” Among the volunteer staff, however, many more of them have quit their positions.

Zygielbaum reports in the past few year volunteers have “decided to call it quits.” However, it doesn’t seem like the clerk’s office struggled with replacing the vacant positions. While some were deterred by threat, others “realized how important elections are and stepped up to answer that call that was for elections.” In a way, extreme threats in Adams County have galvanized people to become election workers. The downside of having new employees join the staff, however, is that they are less knowledgeable about how elections are run. Many of the

volunteers that quit had been on staff for a long time and had a deep knowledge of the procedures and administration.

Zygielbaum reports that there has been an increase in election administrators that are connected to election-denier groups. He says that this has presented a challenge because there are minimal requirements to become an election worker, and the county is obligated through statute to hire someone if they meet the requirements.[30] While there are some skeptical election workers coming from the left, he says that the majority are from the right and are "often more in this category of concerned citizens who think that the election was stolen and they are working so they can see the elections for themselves." Many of these politically conservative election workers who mistrust election administration try to witness any fraud taking place. In the election's office in Adams County, you are not allowed to discuss political candidates or political parties in order to remain as nonpartisan as possible. "We've had some election workers who have been very passionate about certain candidates and made statements about how elections are being stolen from them. And we unfortunately simply can't have that." Zygielbaum tells me everything they do is on camera and is audited. If someone is doing something wrong, he is confident they will catch it.

II c. CENTRALIZATION

According to Zygielbaum money, resources, partnerships, and solid processes and procedures directed by the state help election officials be put at ease. Both the secretary of state's office and Homeland Security were very involved with implementing protections for election

[30] The requirements to become an election worker in Colorado are as follows: be registered to vote and when there is a background check run on the prospective election worker, there is no history of voter related crimes or fraud related crimes. "Somebody could murder somebody else, and they would be eligible, but they can't have committed any type of voter fraud in order to be an election worker," says Zygielbaum.

workers. The state has partnered with Auburn University to organize education and seminars to discuss issues of security. “The amount of money and resources we put into securing our offices and our building definitely helped put people at ease,” says Zygielbaum. However, Adams County took the initiative to establish its own connection with law enforcement to go the extra mile to ensure the safety of all their election officials. Zygielbaum works closely with law enforcement so he can pass on any threatening messages that his office receives. While the state provides ample training, the county is still taking initiative to ensure complete protection.

Another aspect of centralization that Zygielbaum relies on are the procedures set by the state so that election officials have administrative guidelines they can lean on in the face of election denialism. The “solid processes and procedures” set by the state ensure that everything election officials do leading up to the election, and on election day go off without a hitch. The state works with counties to plan, double-check, and triple-check the procedures of all the steps. Having these steps in place allows election workers to stay “focused on the job at hand and keep that extra noise and stress out,” says Zygielbaum. Election officials are better able to cope with rising pressure and intensity from election deniers if they can stay focused on the procedures implemented by the state. Because the procedural process is centralized on the state level, election officials are not vulnerable to attack the same way an official would be in a state where procedure is established by local administrators.

Adams County uses Dominion voting machines, and like many other places, has heard its fair share of conspiracy theories about fraudulent machines. Zygielbaum knows that these statements were just made to sow distrust and that the claims were baseless. He is confident that

the Dominion Voting machines are "rock solid."[31] While the security procedure for all voting machines and the auditing process is the same throughout the state, as mandated by the Secretary of State's office, there is not a uniform voting system throughout the state. I posit that this sign of decentralization leaves election officials more vulnerable to conspiracy theories about their voting machines, creating a reason to switch to hand-counting all ballots.[32]

Lastly, the funding provided to all Colorado counties by the state provides robust support to each individual county. When I asked Zygielbaum if the increase in election denialism spurred any changes or presented challenges to the administration of elections, he told me the only thing that really stood out in the Adam's County operation was the budget. "We had to reallocate money from certain programs to cover the costs of those additional resources or additional supplies. And so, it changed that dynamic. But as far as operating the election itself, that was business as usual, making sure that every eligible vote counted," Zygielbaum says. This is a clear demonstration of the flexibility election officials have when they are provided with funding from the state. Because basic election costs are taken care of, Adams County has the ability to access additional resources and supplies. If all funding for elections is provided solely by a county, there are fewer resources pay for extra protections that may be necessary amid violence or threat.

II d. CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Secretary of State's office and Adams County — through funding, training, and seminars provided—has allowed Adams County election officials to have

[31]Zygielbaum says that even though the voting machines are off the internet, he's heard some alarming conspiracy theories, "I've heard some of the strangest things. That Russian submarines are off the coast of California that are hacking into our elections through electrical outlets. I really don't know where they are coming up with this stuff or how they think of it. At the end of the day, the claims are made but the systems themselves are very secure."

[32] See Nye County and Esmeralda County in the Nevada section.

relatively high resilience while also facing high forms of election denialism. The election workers in Adams County, however, have not stayed as resilient as its more centralized counterpart, Otero County. While only a few members of the full-time staff have left, many election volunteers have quit. Those who have taken their places as volunteers are understandably less experienced and possess less knowledge about election administration. In a centralized state like Colorado, this can easily be remedied through proper guidelines and certification provided by the Secretary of State's office. This would cause more chaos and hinder the administration of a county in a decentralized state that is responsible for providing its own procedures and training processes.

Some of the onus to create systems of security, however, has been put on Zygielbaum and his staff. Additionally, when dealing with workers who have ties to election-denier groups, Adams County is letting them go. In Otero County, Holmes felt that she had sufficient capacity, support, and confidence in her system to let these election workers stay on staff. I believe that the level of centralization is correlated with the tolerance of subversive beliefs among election officials. I posit that if Colorado was ranked a three on the centralization scale, counties would purposefully keep the election-denier staff members employed to show them the process and assure them that no fraud is taking place.

III. ARIZONA

Arizona, like Colorado, was placed on the FBI's list of the seven states with an unusual threat to election workers. Election officials in Arizona have faced a vicious onslaught of threats and misinformation. This harassment is prevalent on social media, phone calls, and emails, as well as physical attacks and protests. Leading up to the 2022 midterm elections in Maricopa

County, Arizona's largest county, over 140 threats to election officials were recorded *just* between July 11 and August 1, 2022 (Boehm 2022).

Election denialism is widespread among state politicians in Arizona. Republicans in the state legislature were so convinced that there was fraud in the election they hired an obscure company called the "Cyber Ninjas" to conduct an "audit" of the 2020 election in Maricopa County. The company concluded that they found irregularities in the election, though they had kept in close contact with people who were working to keep Trump in office and had asked people close to Trump for money (Hasen 2022). None of the claims made by the Cyber Ninjas were substantiated. In fact, after their audit had concluded, Biden had won Maricopa County by *more* votes than were first tallied (Waldman 2022). The Arizona Supreme Court ordered the Cyber Ninjas to release public records, but the company refused and was fined $50,000 per day. It subsequently shut down. The state legislature-sponsored commission of the Cyber Ninjas, and the fiasco that followed, is just one of many examples of a growing threat to election integrity from lawmakers. For example, State Senator Wendy Rogers told her constituents of Coconino County to claim "identity theft" at the polls during the 2022 midterm elections. This sent Coconino County election officials scrambling (Protect Democracy Project 2022).

These threats have contributed to a large exodus of election officials in Arizona. Five of Arizona's fifteen counties had new election directors for the 2022 midterm election (Protect Democracy Project 2022). The Secretary of State, Adrien Fontes, has raised the alarm, "We've lost election directors in Yuma County, Cochise, Pima, Yavapai, Pinal County twice, Santa Cruz County, and County Recorders and elected registrars of voters in Pinal, Yavapai, Yuma, Santa Cruz. We only have 15 counties in Arizona. We are in an emergency," said Secretary Fontes. He

attributes these losses to the exhausting impact disinformation and threats have on election officials (MSNBC Last Word 2023).

III a. ARIZONA COUNTY

I expect that the case study for Arizona will have low resilience due to Arizona's decentralized election apparatus. I hypothesize that the small number of resources provided by the state and the lack of a support network for election officials will increase burnout and leave election officials more vulnerable to harassment and assault.[33]

The county analyzed for the Arizona was selected based similar demographics to the other case studies. Additionally, the county has seen a high level of election denialism and staff turnover, including several elections directors in the past three years. The current election director was internally assigned to the role from another county office.

The election official I spoke with told me they noticed a difference in how the county election staff was treated. They said that after 2020, the rhetoric became poisonous and toxic and the number of bills that hamper election administration or restrict voter access that are moving through the Arizona legislature became extreme. In the past few years, the election staff in the county analyzed has been facing constant negative and threatening phone calls and emails, and people have been sitting on the doorstep of the elections department demanding answers. After an administrative debacle with a former election official, however, things got ugly. Not only did this light a fire among constituents, but it also galvanized election-denier candidates to speak out about the election's irregularities. The election official reported that the election staff has dealt with harassment on the phone, by email, and through social media. In the election officials' time

[33] An election official from the county analyzed in this case agreed to participate without being named. Both the election official and the county have been made anonymous.

working closely with elections, they recognizes that there has been an extreme shift in rhetoric and attitude towards election officials. The county staff is gearing up for 2024 and are expecting that it will only continue to get worse.

Officials in the examined county have faced distrust and conspiracy theories about voting machines. The most prominent form of pushback the county office has received is skepticism regarding the voting tabulator machines. Constituents believe that the scanning function on these machines is rigged and fraudulent. They have called to eliminate the machines and transition to a hand count vote. However, the election official I spoke with says it is simply unrealistic for election officials to be charged with thousands of hand count thousands of ballots and still meet canvass deadlines.

III b. RESILIENCE

The resilience among election officials in Arizona's analyzed county is much lower than in Adams or Otero County. After the 2022 midterms, only *one* person remained on staff in the county's elections office. To replace the staff, the county tried to recruit outside hires. However, there was a tight time frame between the primary and general election. To fill gaps, the county assigned people who already worked for the county to the election's office.

The election official I spoke with brought up the fact that there have been challenges to administration when nearly everyone in the office lacks experience in election administration and was transferred from a different county office simply to "fill the void." The election official said that recruitment to work in the election's office is difficult. They chalked this up to people not having experience in elections, but it is necessary for the office to grow its staff. I believe that the difficulty in recruitment goes deeper than people feeling inexperienced in elections. Plenty of election officials do this work out of a sense of duty or pride, not because they have prior

election experience. Staff members who were assigned from other county offices with no real tie to election administration and little knowledge about election administration could have a harder time protecting themselves from misinformation and accusations and be especially vulnerable to quitting.

III c. CENTRALIZATION

The Arizona State Constitution cannot permit a singular state-wide office to direct elections. The election official told me that while the Secretary of State's office is a helpful resource, elections are still happening on a local level. They said that elections are such a complex and intense process that it doesn't make sense to run all elections through a state agency. The Arizona Secretary of State's office does provide some support in the form of funding presidential and primary elections, certifying election equipment, and offering voluntary training. The Secretary of State's office also has a centralized database for all registered voters, which includes all but two counties. Training is a key factor in protecting election officials in the most centralized states. In Arizona, election officials are certified by the state. The election official reported that in odd years, the Secretary of State's office provides training, but they weren't sure if county clerks are mandated to participate. As a full-time staff member in the election's office, I am almost certain that if this training were mandatory, they would know about it. Beyond certifying election officials and voting machines, there is little in the way of procedures and guidelines that were reported in the two previous case studies. The county has been responsible for finding ways to make its election officials safer. The election official interviewed told me that their office took steps to increase security and put the staff at ease. This was elections office's responsibility, not that of the state. There were no processes and or resources that the election official mentioned that have been initiated by the state to protect their election officials.

III d. CONCLUSION

Lack of funding, resources, and proper training has left the examined county continuously understaffed. When the election directors leave their jobs, it is the county's responsibility to fill all vacancies. According to the election official I spoke with, there was no state assistance while the county scrambled to clean up this mess and find people to staff the elections office. I believe that this is a symptom of decentralization in Arizona. Administrative mistakes made by a former election director in the county cannot solely be blamed on this one election official. If the office had a full staff to rely on, increased resources from the state, or solid procedures and guidelines created by the Secretary of State's office, these mistakes may not have occurred.

The mistakes made by county employees, the rampant staff turnover, and the need to look within the county offices to reassign employees to the elections division point to the high decentralization in Arizona. Elections in Arizona are underfunded, officials are undertrained, and there is no structure of support to retain staff. Instead, the analyzed county must look internally to find staff, train them, and cope with the increase in threats and harassment from constituents. Because the county election staff is still new and without "institutional knowledge of elections," as the election official I spoke with puts it, the county is particularly vulnerable to an influx of threats and harassment as the 2024 presidential primary and general elections nears.

IV. NEVADA

Nevada has faced a significant threat to election integrity in the form of citizens, lawmakers, and candidates who are sympathetic to the Big Lie. The 2022 Republican gubernatorial candidate, Joe Lombardo, Republican Senate candidate, Adam Laxalt, and Republican Secretary of State candidate, Jim Marchant, ran their respective campaigns on the fact that the 2020 presidential election was stolen. This further sewed distrust of the voting process and machines among voters in Nevada. The lingering threat of violence, notably not just on election day, has had a tremendous effect on the resilience of election officials in Nevada. Since the 2020 election, top election officials in ten of Nevada's seventeen counties have quit, retired, or declined to seek office again (So et al. 2022).

Election officials in Nevada have been strongly affected by the chorus of conspiracy theories that the 2020 and 2022 elections were fraudulent. This can be attributed to the nature of the violence that election officials face, as well as the onslaught of information requests that election officials must deal with. Many supporters of the Big Lie started submitting "voluminous" requests for information (So et al. 2022). As a result, some election officials in Nevada have quit due to exhaustion and burnout. Others have left because they are not willing to withstand the vitriol, they have faced in the past few of years. Internal records show that only three of the 11 employees of the Secretary of State's Elections Department have remained since 2020. The department says that five have come and gone in that span (Stern 2022).

The danger of all these resignations, as we see in previous case studies, is that the experienced election officials that have been trained are vacating posts, leaving room for those who have less trust and knowledge in the system to take their place. In Storey County, a clerk won office after signing certificates falsely stating Trump Nevada in the 2020 presidential

election (Stern 2022). Some election officials have, themselves, become convinced that the election infrastructure is rigged.

The threat of having elected election officials who are actively election deniers in office is tangible in Nevada. An interview I had with an election denier who works as a county clerk illustrates the nature of the problem in Nevada.[34] The clerk I spoke to won election after the previous county clerk who had been serving that town for decades retired following the 2020 election when she refused to switch to hand-counted ballots. The current county clerk ran their campaign on his willingness to spearhead the transition to hand-counting all ballots. They said that voters in his county expressed concern about the voting machines around 2020 and that there was a "general distrust brought out by a coordinated effort to influence the 2020 election." This clerk said that the main concerns for himself and his county were "electronic voting machines, the manipulation of the voter rolls, the use of the paper ballots for mail. People don't like that. But [the state] uses it because it's easy."

This county clerk says that after his country switched to all hand count ballots, they, "had an incredible outpouring of support from the community for poll workers that allowed us to have a good mix of staff who were representative of the voting population in the county based on their political affiliation." They called those who volunteered to assist with the hand count in the 2022 midterm elections "patriots." They went on to say that "90 percent of the people that I spoke with said that they did not trust the mechanical voting systems. They wanted them gone. There was an incredible amount of mistrust in the electronic voting process. And so, they were very happy to see us move to a paper ballot process." They claimed the hand county sample was more accurate

[34] The clerk described here does not work for Elko County, the focus of my Nevada case study. Rather, this election official works for another similarly situated county in the state.

than the tabulation process despite telling me earlier in the conversation that they used the hand count to verify the tabulation machines and the voting machines had an accurate count.

IV a. ELKO COUNTY

I expect to find the lowest resilience among election officials in Elko County due to the extremely fragmented nature of election administration in Nevada. I contend that the lack of funding, training, and variety in the voting procedure and administration of voting processes will contribute to difficulty in retaining and recruiting staff.

Elko County has a population of approximately 54,000 people. It has a median household income of $82,462. The racial demographics of Elko County are 65.4 percent White (non-Hispanic), 25.5 percent White (Hispanic or Latino), 6.6 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.8 percent mixed race, 1.4 percent African American, and 1.4 percent Asian (U.S. Census Bureau). The county is heavily Republican. The county has a low percentage of its population that is actually registered to vote. In October of 2022, Elko County only had 22,240 registered voters, 12,211 of them were registered Republicans and only 4,877 were registered Democrats (Elko County Unofficial General Election Results). In the 2022 midterm elections, Adam Laxalt took 75.23 percent of the vote over his Democratic incumbent opponent. Similarly, Joe Lombardo won the county with 75.22 percent of the vote for Governor.

Elko County has experienced an internal threat to voting systems, similarly to other counties in Nevada. Their county, however, was able to resist a transition to hand-counting votes and continue to use their voting machines. County Commissioner Rex Steninger spearheaded an effort to get rid of their voting machines and gathered 300 signatures for the county to switch to hand-count votes (Elko Daily 2022). The election staff was able to resist this petition and continue to use the Dominion voting machines. The main reason why the county could do so is

that a full hand count would have cost $36,000. Alicia Guaman, a Deputy County Clerk in Elko County, said that the county simply does not have enough resources to staff a hand count. Guaman says that the Elko County election staff pushed back against the County Commission and asked, “how would that even be possible to do a handout and provide these results accurately to the state and meet our deadlines? We would need a really large staff, and that staff would be volunteers. We would need space. Right now, we have 13 employees, and we are running out of space. We need more employees; we would need more employees, but we don't have space for them. So, we would have to rent out a place, secure it, and transfer the ballots.” The staff shortages in funding, staffing, and space protected them from being forced to transition from voting machines to a hand count.

The county has experienced persistent harassment from its constituents. Guaman has been working elections in Nevada since 2017 and has spent the last three years in Elko County’s Clerk’s office. When I asked her if there was a shift between when she began working in elections and how election staff is treated now, she responded affirmatively, saying, “Oh yeah, there was a big shift. In 2020 there was a major shift worldwide, and we felt it locally.” She said there was most notably a decrease in public confidence. Kris Jakeman, the long-time county clerk, has been working to restore voter confidence. Guaman told me that while Jakeman has been successful in convincing some voters that the process is trustworthy, “there’s a smaller group that you can't change their mind and they will very openly tell you there's nothing you can say to change my mind.”

Guaman has said that no one in the office has been physically threatened, but voters have practiced tactics of intimidation. Voters will, for example, come into the office and tear up their ballot in front of the election officials’ faces and throw it at them or will send nasty emails back

anytime the office sends out an email to update a voter on the progress of their ballot or the change of address. She said that some of the harassment "died down a bit" between 2020 and 2022 but anger from voters has been relatively consistent since the 2020 election.

IV b. RESILIENCE

Between 2021 and October 2022, thirteen staff members of the Elko County Clerk's office left. According to Jakeman, three of these members had left solely due to "election stress" (Stern 2022). As of October 25, 2022, the county had been able to replace only eight of the staff members who had left. However, when I spoke with Guaman and asked if any of the full-time staff had quit, she told me, "Full-time staff remains normal" and that the office has been fully re-staffed as of early 2023. Jakeman, herself, almost didn't run for re-election but decided at the very last minute to run. If she had declined to campaign for re-election, Elko County would have been the state's eleventh county to have turnover in a clerk or registrar of voter position. Jakeman said, "it's kind of disheartening when you work so hard, and our staff works so hard, and people just don't want to believe what we're doing is right" (Stern 2022).

There has been increased difficulty in finding election volunteers. Guaman said that there was an increase in no-shows when it came to volunteer poll workers. She partly attributed this to measures put in place during COVID. She thinks that using PPE, sanitizer, masks, gloves, and other protective equipment turned people off from volunteering as poll workers. Additionally, Nevada turned to all mail-in ballots during the 2020 election. Guaman says, "It was kind of flipped on us. The Governor went ahead and made the entire state of Nevada mail-in ballots and voting, but so many people still wanted to vote in person so that kind of brought up all kinds of different issues."

The quick shift from in-person voting to mail-in ballot voting did not sit well with many voters in Elko County, who continued to vote in person. Elko election staff was forced to run a "hybrid" election. Guaman says they allowed people to vote in person, still on paper ballots, while also receiving high numbers of mail-in ballots. She says, "it was just more than that workload of having to conduct a hybrid election for 2020 when we were learning it, and then 2022. We still had to do that hybrid election where every active registered voter still got a ballot in the mail, and then we still had that in-person voting." This procedure in in direct conflict with rules implemented by the secretary of state during the pandemic. Despite the mandate that all elections are to be conducted through mail-in ballots, Elko County has created a hybrid system of voting. Since the state shifted to all mail-in ballots, the number of paper ballots that the Elko County Clerk's Office sends out has increased from 2,500 to 26,000 (Stern, 2022). This rapid increase creates a high demand to recruit new election staff. However, as of October 25, 2022, Jakeman reported the county had only been able to replace eight of the thirteen staff members that left the office, showing signs of difficulty in recruitment.[35] This also puts more responsibility and more pressure on the remaining staff in the office. I argue that workload and skepticism about voting machines have affected staff retention and recruitment in Elko County.

The county staff's elections by advertising on the county website and social media for poll workers. Voters also reach out to the county office to express interest in volunteering. The Republican Party, however, offers their help with recruiting people to volunteer during the elections, "The Republican Party was very helpful. They would say, 'whatever, like if you need more, tell me,' and they'll reach out to their contacts." She also told me that different political

[35] It should be noted that Guaman reported to me there are now 13 staff members in the Elko County Clerk's Office.

organizations also will help provide poll workers by accessing their databases and asking for volunteers. Elko County is the first county I have come across that would rely on political parties or partisan organizations to find poll workers. This exemplifies the difficulty in recruiting election volunteers from the public if outside organizations needed to step in for assistance.

IV c. CENTRALIZATION

The rapid transition to all mail-in ballots is a representation of Nevada's decentralized system. Guaman details all the questions that came up because their county was responsible for coordinating the transition with the other cities, "pretty quickly, we had to come up with solutions. How are we going to accept these ballots? Where are we going to accept them?" Guaman says that because the county is so spread out, one of the solutions they came up with was to allow for the mail-in ballots to be sent to the city clerks and then delivered to the County Clerk's office using highway patrol and local police as an escort. The county themselves decided which procedure for all mail-in ballots was best suited for them. They executed their election administration to an extent, leaving the cities responsible for organizing part of it, as well. Aspects they were responsible for, the transporting, supplies, and security, have been the responsibility of the state in the centralized case studies.

The state did provide funding for some costs associated with the transition to mail-in ballots. When I asked about the funding that the state provides for elections, Guaman only referenced the money provided for the increased cost of the mail-in ballots. Beyond that, it is the county's responsibility to fund elections. The state does not cover any costs specifically associated with election supplies. Additionally, other states have increased the presence of law enforcement, for example, to ensure the physical security of their election officials. In Elko County, however, the county's prior relationship with law enforcement has involved them in the

process. “We have had a good rapport with our local law enforcement. We feel comfortable calling them when needed, they make their rounds and all that,” Guaman said. The county clerks' office established that relationship with law enforcement to protect themselves, as opposed to the state coordinating with law enforcement for them

Another aspect of the decentralized system that Guaman mentioned is the bottom-up system that is used for the administration of voting records. Guaman says that the bottom-up system is slower to update and doesn’t facilitate good communication between counties. “Voters will get their ballot either mailed to an empty house or another voter, or they move over to another county and they're issuing out a ballot and so now the voter has two ballots. It creates a little bit of confusion, but we do our best to educate our voters,” Guaman says. The decentralization in the bottom-up election administration seems to cause more work and less organization for both the election officials and the voters alike. This is harmful because voters can perceive unorganized election administration as less secure. This only exacerbates the challenges of a decentralized system because the inconsistency in election administration can brew more distrust.

Lastly, when discussing the transition to all hand-count systems in other Nevada counties, Guaman said it was “worrisome” and “eye-opening” for their office. As we saw with the county commissioner’s attempt to transition to hand-count ballots, the county is vulnerable to legislative pressure to stop using their voting machines. This time the county was able to use a public audit to quell fears of rigged voting machines and voter fraud. In a state like Colorado, which has already passed bills to protect election officials, this would not be as concerning. I argue, if counties must use their own resources, staff, and time to consistently prove that their voting machines are accurate, staff will eventually be unable to fend off pressure to structurally change

their election system. In addition, if more counties in Nevada transition to hand-count ballots, the movement will only continue to become large and harder to ignore.

IV d. CONCLUSION

I believe that the decentralization in Nevada actively contributes to the difficulty in staff retention and recruitment in Elko County. The county has struggled with high turnover and an inability to quickly replace staff members who have left office. I also believe that the reality of election deniers being election officials is heightened in a decentralized state. In centralized states, there are mechanisms in the form of legislation or tight-knit relationships among election officials that protect against election deniers taking office.

In addition, there is no mandatory training. The county clerk whose county switched to hand-count ballots says that there is a PowerPoint that election officials are supposed to watch but "it's not very good." Without comprehensive and up-to-date training, election officials are more vulnerable to not being able to defend themselves from conspiracy theories and accusations. They are also more susceptible to believing misinformation, especially if their fellow election officials are election deniers.

The county clerk who distrusted voting machines portrays the reality that election officials actively believe that the election process is rigged or fraudulent. They told me that the concerns their constituents had regarding the voting machines were "valid." In a system that is decentralized, election officials can get away with actions like this. Even in an extremely conservative area in a more centralized state, there would be less tolerance for this type of behavior from election officials.

Lastly, low levels of retention among election allow for the county to use political parties as a source of volunteers. While Guaman treats this as a normal part of staffing elections, it

speaks to the lack of state capacity to provide support to administering elections. The county looks to local political parties instead of the government to fulfill basic functions. The administration of elections should be non-partisan, but having the Republican party being a main source of election volunteers could potentially be problematic. I believe that this could cause more harm in a decentralized state as little state oversight and control could protect against partisan actors influencing election administration.

CONCLUSION

This chapter delves into a close analysis of each case study and the resilience of county-level election officials. It also analyzes how the varying levels of centralization in each of the four states has an impact on said resilience. As expected, the more centralized the state, the higher resilience portrayed by election officials. Election officials in New Mexico and Colorado have higher retention rates and it is easier to recruit new staff, as compared to Arizona and Nevada. Otero County has only lost one election official and saw only a small change in the difficulty to recruit volunteers for election day. Adams County lost a handful of full-time election staff, but the county clerk remained adamant that they did not leave purely because of election stress. The county did lose significant amounts of volunteer staff and saw an influx of new, less experienced volunteer workers who were motivated to contribute to elections. The Arizona county studied has had extremely high rates of turnover in the election office. Not only were they the fifth election director in three years, but after the third election director left only one election official remained. The county needed to turn to those already employed in the county offices to staff the election office. Lastly, Elko County had thirteen officials leave the office between 202-2022 and could only replace eight of them as of October 2022.

The centralized case studies highlight the importance of consistent procedures, training, and funding that were available for local election officials. Officials can rely on a support system from the state to feel physically protected and adequately resourced to fight off election denialism. They are able to trust that extra security measures, both physical and administrative are put in place and that they would not need to bear the brunt of any increased costs. Having different types of voting systems leaves election officials vulnerable to misinformation attacks on the voting system themselves. A varied voting system creates more difficulty when it comes to training, as well. In a state with a uniform voting procedure, election officials can receive comprehensive training on election equipment from the state. Additionally, uniformity in voting procedure will ensure that election officials are familiar with and confident in the state-wide voting system. Training is an important aspect of centralization that was not highlighted as much as I expected it to be. Training made a notable difference in decentralized states, as election officials were being replaced at high rates and entering the job without "institutional knowledge of elections," as the election official in the Arizona case study described. Without training, there is no assurance that election officials will understand all proper procedures and laws, which leaves them less confident, less likely to adequately defend themselves against election deniers, and makes them more likely to be influenced by election denier rhetoric.

Centralized states have the privilege to rely on their states to provide them with all information they need regarding administration and updated policies on security, de-escalation, and coping tactics. The least influential aspect of centralization was the voter registration system. This seemed to be more of a burden for local election officials in decentralized states. While it didn't seem to put the integrity of elections in jeopardy, extra tedious work can leave already vulnerable election officials more likely to quit.

I find that there is a direct, positive correlation between the centralization of state election law and local election officials' resilience. All the metrics of centralization aid officials' ability to cope with the Big Lie. However, this analysis shows that state support networks and administrative guidelines contribute to the concentration of control at the state level. State procedures and guidelines take the burden and responsibility out of the hands of election officials who can avoid needing to respond to constituent demands because they, legally, cannot do anything. However, if that power becomes too concentrated, and is controlled by an election denier, election officials would highly benefit from a decentralized system.

Conclusion

My findings that centralization of election law contributes to increased resilience of local election officials will shed new light on how states and localities can cope with election denialism. As extreme partisanship and divisiveness plague American politics, the Big Lie and related conspiracy theories will continue to pervade the political discourse. Local election officials and their states must learn how to adapt to a consistent and ongoing threat to election integrity. My purpose for writing this thesis was to contribute to the scholarship on current challenges to U.S. election administration and provide a pathway to increased resilience among local election officials.

Through my study, I provide a foundation of the historical roots of a highly decentralized system within U.S. politics. This framework allows me to explore the nuances of election administration as they differ in each state and, often, in each municipality. Research shows that states with higher levels of centralization were better able to implement HAVA requirements. My approach updates this study to question if centralization can contribute to combating violence, conspiracy theories, and misinformation that flows from the Big Lie. I hypothesized that states with higher levels of centralization would have higher resilience among election officials.

I found that states in the South and West region are empirically receiving the highest levels of threat, assault, and harassment to local election officials. Utilizing my centralization framework, I chose four states with varying levels of centralization to test my hypothesis. Through conversations with local election officials in each case study, I found that centralization does indeed play a fundamental role in the resilience of local election officials. Election officials specifically point to state support through funding, training of officials, and pre-existing,

enumerated policies and procedures for election officials to follow. State funding for costs associated with elections allows for election offices to have more resources to implement protective measures against threats to election integrity. Mandatory and up-to-date training conducted by the state will allows for election officials to confidently understand the election system as well as feel more equip to on ways to combat election denialism. Uniformity in voting procedure across the state allows for individual localities to be less vulnerable to demands to change or get rid of voting procedure, as they are not isolated to their own individual procedures. Top-down voter registration systems eliminate disorganization and miscommunication among localities which will decrease burnout, as well avoid fanning the flames of claims of incompetent election administration. State-wide policy and procedure that is handed down from the state creates offers a mechanism of defense for election officials to rebuke demands of altering their administrative systems. Even if they wanted to change a regulation, they simply do not have the power to do so. Officials also said that support networks initiated by the state and state-sponsored support from law enforcement allow election officials to feel safer and more comfortable on the job.

I found that the decentralized states that did not have solid policies and procedures to rely on, must foot the costs for election administration, and do not have election officials trained have much lower levels of resilience. The election official from the Arizona case study is working with a staff who were recruited from other county offices and are completely new to elections. They explain it succinctly as they say that these staff members – who do not receive mandatory training – lack institutional knowledge of elections. Decentralized states limit the acquisition of institutional knowledge which leaves election officials vulnerable to misinformation, conspiracy theories, and attacks against them. This means that election officials in decentralized states are

much less equip to feign off internal pressure to alter election administration. Individual counties do not have the same resources, capacity, or access to funding that will allow them to protect themselves physically and through legislative action.

Overall, centralization breeds state support of local election officials that protect against challenges to election integrity. However, election denialism does not exist in a vacuum among so-called "MAGA" supporters. The 2022 midterm elections saw an influx of election officials that are outspoken proponents of the Big Lie. While many of these candidates failed to win election, they are a significant threat to the future of election integrity. The county clerk in Nevada I spoke to ran their campaign on the platform to ban voting machines and has since implemented hand-counting ballots. This is one county in Nevada, but what happens if an entire state's election administration is run by an election denier? An election denier who is governor or secretary of state could begin to implement policies, such as transitioning away from voting machines to hand-counting votes, that are detrimental to conducting free and fair elections. In this case, a decentralized state could provide increased protection against top-down mandates that curb essential processes of democratic election administration.

Future studies should ask if decentralization becomes more effective to electoral integrity if legislative and institutional threats to election administration become more prevalent and more successful. More research should also be dedicated to analyzing centralization's impact on voter turnout and representation. It could be argued that a decentralized system can allow counties to tailor their electoral administration to the needs of their constituency. Uniform policies and procedures implemented by a centralized state could overlook ways in which specific voting blocs are galvanized to turnout to vote and are represented. The more understanding there is of

centralization of election law, the more experts and local election officials alike can protect against the Big Lie and defend the institutions that are imperative to maintaining democracy.

Structures of federal oversight, created by Section 5 of the 1964 Voting Rights Act may have had an impact on protections to local election officials in covered counties. Increased attention and supervision provided to Section 5 counties enhances federal political insulation. Enhanced federal protection could take the pressure off local officials needing to establish protections against election denialism. In Arizona, the one state examined that was covered under Section 5 prior to the *Shelby County* decision, local election officials could have found protections in the pre-existing federal response structure. While this deserves further attention in a subsequent study, it is worth asking who would hold the responsibility of protection in covered counties. This begs a larger question that does not solely pertain to covered counties but to every county facing high rates of election denialism and threats to election officials. Where should the accountability reside and with whom? At what point do the vitriol and violence that election officials are facing become so extreme that the federal government must step in to ensure all states and counties have a unified response to uphold the democratic integrity of the electoral system?

As Partheymüller et al. describe (2022) election officials are the gatekeepers of democracy. The fabric of our democracy relies on functional elections. The only way that these elections are able to function is through the work of our election administrators. In conversation with the election officials in this study, each and every one of them stressed the importance of public service and commitment to their community. Every election official across the country displays a tremendous amount of dedication and care to their community. Election officials' work, time, and effort is not only severely underappreciated but dismissed as incompetent and

fraudulent. They are faced with violent and harmful threats to their safety and livelihoods. This study is intended to shed light on the vitalness of our election officials not only as protectors of our democracy but as valued civil servants. They deserve to be appreciated and championed for being the front lines of upholding our democracy.

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Appendix

I.

The three metrics used to determine the classification of each centralized state are what parts of elections, if any, the state pays for, what type of training for election officials is mandated by the state, the uniformity in voting procedure and voter registration procedure. Each of these metrics is one point on the centralization scale. For example, a state that exhibits centralization in all three categories receives a three on the scale. A state with only decentralized administration will receive a zero. A state that has counties fund all elections (0), but has mandatory training provided by the state (1) and uniform voting procedure (.5) and voter registration procedure (.5) will receive a 2.

A) The funding section assigns each state to one of five categories:

1. All: The state provides funding for all costs associated with elections.
2. None: The counties or municipalities bear the cost of all elections.
3. Primaries: States will provide funds for primary elections and counties provide funding for all general elections.
4. Special Elections: States provide funding for all special elections, counties fund all normally scheduled elections.
5. Equipment: The state will provide funds, or reimbursement, for equipment or supplies associated with elections.
6. State Candidates: The state will provide funding to elections only when state candidates are listed on the ballot.

States' partial funding to primaries, special elections, or equipment is given half a point. States that completely fund elections are given 1 point. States that provide no funding to elections receive a zero.

B) Training is split into four categories:

1. Mandatory: The state obligates training for all election officials.
2. Voluntary: The state provides training that is not mandated. Election officials may be compensated for attending.
3. Certification: The state will provide certification to election officials that went through their course of training. Election officials may be required to complete some sort training to receive certification, but it is not as intensive as mandatory training.
4. N/A: There is no training provided but states may provide PowerPoints or pamphlets with information.

A point of centralization is assigned only to the states with mandatory training. States that require certification are given half a point. States that have voluntary training or no training are given zero points.

C) Voting procedure and voter registration procedure are combined into one category because they both speak to uniformity in election administration. Both are divided into two categories are worth half a point each.

Voting procedure:

1. Uniform: Each election division across the state uses the same voting equipment.

2. Non-uniform: Each election division can choose which voting equipment they use. Voting equipment is approved by the secretary of state

Voter registration:

1. Top-down: The state runs and maintains a database for all registered voters.
2. Bottom-up: Each election division maintains its own database for registering voters and then shares that information with the state periodically.
3. Hybrid: Individual election divisions maintain their own database and share this information with the state daily.

Uniform voting procedure is given half a point. Non-uniform voting procedure is given zero points. The top-down voting procedure is given half a point and the bottom-up voting procedure is given zero points. The hybrid voting registration procedure is given .25 points.

II.

Each one of these metrics was informed by scholarship on election administration, conversations with current and former election officials, and information provided by the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), and the Congressional Research Service (CRS). After determining that the most effective way to determine centralization is through funding, training, and uniformity in voting procedure and voter registration procedures, I researched each state to determine their election administration laws. I relied heavily on information provided by secretaries of state, counties, and state statutes. I also gathered information on individual states from prior reports published by EAC, NCSL, and CRS. For states that did not have election funding information publicly available, I called the secretary of state or state election commissions to determine that information.

III.

Table 2: Centralization Rankings of All 50 States

State	Centralization category	What the state pays for?	Types of training provided	Voter procedure and voter registration procedure
Alabama	2	All	Voluntary	Uniform, Top-down
Alaska	3	All	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Arizona	.75	Primaries	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Hybrid
Arkansas	2.5	Special elections	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
California	.5	Equipment	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
Colorado	2	All	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Connecticut	1.5	None	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Delaware	3	All	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Florida	1.5	Special elections	Voluntary	Uniform, Top-down
Georgia	2	Equipment	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Hawaii	3	All	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Idaho	1	Primaries	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Top-down
Illinois	1	None	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
Indiana	1.5	None	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Top-down
Iowa	1.5	Special elections	Certification	Non-uniform, Top-down
Kansas	2	Primaries	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Top-down

Kentucky	2	State candidates	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Top- down
Louisiana	1.5	State candidates	Voluntary	Uniform, Top-down
Maine	2.5	Equipment	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Maryland	2.5	Equipment	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Massachusetts	1.5	None	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Top-down
Michigan	2	Special elections	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Minnesota	2	Primaries	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Mississippi	1.25	Equipment	Certification	Non-uniform, Hybrid
Missouri	1	Primaries	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Top-down
Montana	1.5	None	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Nebraska	2	None	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Nevada	0	None	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
New Hampshire	2.5	Equipment	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
New Jersey	1	Special elections	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Top-down
New Mexico	3	All	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
New York	.5	None	N/A	Uniform, Bottom-up
North Carolina	1.25	None	Certification	Uniform, Hybrid
North Dakota	2	Special elections	Mandatory	Uniform, ND does not maintain a voter registration list or database. They use a list of previous voters.
Ohio	1.5	Special elections	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
Oklahoma	2	None	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Oregon	2.5	Special elections	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Pennsylvania	1	Special elections	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Top-down
Rhode Island	2.25	Equipment	Mandatory	Uniform, Hybrid
South Carolina	2	Primaries	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
South Dakota	1	None	Voluntary	Uniform, Top-down
Tennessee	1.5	Special elections	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
Texas	.75	Primaries	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
Utah	.5	Equipment	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Bottom-up
Vermont	2.5	Primaries	Mandatory	Uniform, Top-down
Virginia	1	None	Certification	Uniform, Top-down
Washington	1.25	Special elections	Certification	Non-uniform, Hybrid
West Virginia	2	Special elections	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Top-down
Wisconsin	.75	Special elections	Mandatory	Non-uniform, Hybrid
Wyoming	1	Equipment	Voluntary	Non-uniform, Top-down

IV. Informed Consent

To preface every interview, I began with an overview of my thesis project and why I was interested in using their county as a case study. I introduced myself as an undergraduate politics major from Bates College working on my thesis. During each conversation, I explained that I was researching election administration in the U.S., and I was specifically interested in state centralization. I explained I was examining how concentration on state resources of election administration, through funding, training, and uniformity in voting procedure and voting

registration. I wanted to know if they have an impact on the resilience of election officials in their county. For each county, I explained that I was examining four Southwest states and interviewed election officials about election administration and threats to administration in a county in each state. I would inform the interviewee that I had selected counties of similar size and demographics and those counties that had experienced some level of pushback for their election administration.

For conversations with Matt Dunlap and Shenna Bellows, this introduction differed slightly. I would explain the work I was doing surrounding threats to election officials and state centralization. In our conversations, I asked for their reflections on their experience with election denialism in Maine and how it compares to what they are seeing around the country. The main purpose of our conversations, however, was to receive feedback if my metrics of centralization seemed adequate to them.

After providing this detail on my study, I would ask for the interviewee for their consent to be recorded. All but one election official granted that consent. The one election official who declined to be recorded gave me permission to take notes on the interview. After writing my thesis I obtained written consent from each participant to include quotations from their interview in my published thesis. Any election official that did not give permission to be named in the thesis has been made anonymous. Both their names and the names of the counties, as well as any identifying information, was not included in the thesis.

V. Interview Questions

These are the questions that I used to guide each interview. As expected, not every interview uniformly stuck to this script, but these questions guided each interview and allowed me to steer the conversation in the right direction.

- Was there a noticeable shift in the way election staff were being treated? When did this start? Was this shift mostly rhetorical, in the form of mistrust from constituents, or physical attacks?
- Were there significant threats to election officials that impeded the ability of election officials to conduct the 2020 presidential election or 2022 midterms?
- Have you noticed changes or challenges in recruiting staff?
- How were election officials able to handle this? Were there specific forms of support they could look to on the state level or local level to help? Do you think that state resources of funding, provided training, and uniformity in voting/voter registration procedure increased resilience among election officials?
- Was there an impact on election worker resilience or burnout? In other words, how did misinformation and threat have an impact on staff retention and recruitment of staff?
- What are some other structural impacts on election integrity or conducting elections at the local level that you've observed? What was the impact on individual election officials?
- How much is this affecting your ability to do your job?
- What do you think this trend says about your ability to conduct free and fair elections? overall, both within your state and across the country?

- How much do you talk about these things in other counties? Have these things come up in other counties throughout the state?

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