

# Size Matters in Election Administration

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Much has changed in the administration of elections in the United States since the passage of the Help American Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002. Among other things, HAVA led to new voting equipment and statewide voter registration databases for much of the country and it required new procedures for provisional voting. State and local election officials had to adapt to the law's mandates.

The decentralized nature of the American federal system means that most election procedures are managed by relatively autonomous county or municipal officials. What is less appreciated is that decentralization is associated with tremendous disparities in local election administration, as the jurisdictions vary dramatically in terms of the size of the voting population they serve. Local administration is so skewed that less than 5 percent of the local election officials in the United States serve roughly two-thirds of the voters in a national election. Despite holding general elections on the same day, heavily populated and sparsely populated local jurisdictions share very little in common when it comes to administering elections, and this has consequences.

Since HAVA was a compromise, it offered something for both political parties. However, this did not diminish disputes over election laws. If anything, HAVA spawned more partisan conflict and more scrutiny of the election infrastructure in the United States. Some of that scrutiny sheds light on the drastic variation in the size of local jurisdictions that administer elections, which has important and underappreciated consequences for election administration and reform. The interaction of local autonomy and size disparities leads to real differences in how elections are administered - in the experiences voters have, in the personnel managing elections, and in the adoption and use of innovative practices.

The passage of HAVA, and the reaction to it from state and local election officials, has exacerbated these differences. Despite some measurable improvements in election administration that can be attributed to HAVA, the law has likely hardened opposition to further election reforms among officials in the more numerous small and medium-sized local jurisdictions. This is partly due to the increased cost and complexity of election administration that localities must now absorb as a result of HAVA. It is also because, after HAVA, local jurisdictions must comply with state and federal mandates for situations that occur relatively infrequently in small jurisdictions. Many newfangled methods of casting a ballot, such as provisional voting and absentee voting, occur disproportionately in a relatively small number of densely populated urban and suburban jurisdictions. The partisan-driven lawsuits that have emerged over these voting procedures are likely also concentrated in large jurisdictions.

Finally, the demand for innovation in election administration is largely confined to officials in the most populous local jurisdictions in the United States. Yet, in many states the policy recommendations of those local officials may be drowned out by the more numerous

officials in other jurisdictions who serve vastly smaller voting populations. As a result, policy changes that might help large jurisdictions contend with a vast, mobile and rapidly growing population of eligible voters are unlikely to be adopted.

### **1. The Magnitude of the Size Disparity**

We identify all of the local jurisdictions that administer elections in the United States, producing a list of 10,499 localities. We identify these jurisdictions by focusing on the units with responsibility for hiring, training, and monitoring poll workers.<sup>1</sup> These localities vary substantially in terms of the number of voters they serve and thus the number of poll workers they need to hire. The median jurisdiction served slightly more than 1,000 voters in the 2008 presidential election. Half of the local election jurisdictions in the United States are small towns or counties with very few election staff. At the same time, roughly two-thirds of the voters in the 2008 election were served by just 457 large jurisdictions (4% of the jurisdictions). Put differently, 96 percent of the local jurisdictions served just one-third of the voters in 2008. We are certainly not the only ones to observe the dramatic disparity in the size of local jurisdictions (Gronke and Stewart 2008, 8). As we show below, the election administration experience is vastly different in these two types of jurisdictions.

[Figure 1 about here]

To simplify some of the analyses that follow, we divide the universe of local jurisdictions into three size categories: small (serving less than 1,000 voters), medium (serving between 1,000 and 50,000 voters), and large jurisdictions (serving more than 50,000 voters). We chose 1,000 voters as one dividing line because jurisdictions with fewer than 1,000 voters are generally small towns that have no more than a couple of polling places and a handful of poll workers. We expect these jurisdictions to have a different election administration experience than larger jurisdictions. In addition, roughly half of the jurisdictions served less than 1,000 voters in recent presidential elections, so this serves as a natural break in the data. We chose 50,000 voters as the other dividing line because jurisdictions serving more than 50,000 voters tend to be in densely populated metropolitan areas with a large central city. Thus, the largest jurisdictions have different infrastructure and transportation networks than the medium-sized jurisdictions, which are mostly rural and exurban counties. These dimensions characterize what we define as small, medium, and large jurisdictions in a variety of analyses below. The smallest jurisdictions are primarily in the upper Midwest and New England, with a smaller number in the Plains. Large jurisdictions

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<sup>1</sup> Election administration is shared, to some degree, between county and municipal officials in three states (Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin). Our total of 10,499 local jurisdictions includes municipalities in those three states. If one instead counts the county as the relevant local jurisdiction on those three states (e.g., Kimball and Kropf 2006; U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2011) that yields roughly 4,600 local jurisdictions administering elections in the United States. We use both datasets below and show that using either method produces a similar skewed distribution of election responsibilities in the United States.

are concentrated in the major metropolitan centers of the United States. Figure 1 shows the distribution of local jurisdictions by size based on the 2008 election, with the overwhelming majority in the small and medium-sized categories. Almost half of the local jurisdictions are in the small category, with almost as many in the medium-sized category. By comparison, very few local jurisdictions serve large voting populations.

To illustrate this point, Figure 2 shows the number of voters served by each type of jurisdiction in the 2008 general election. Most voters in the United States (almost two-thirds of them) are served by large jurisdictions. Small localities, while comprising almost half of the election jurisdictions in the United States, only served a bit more than one percent of voters in 2008. Examining growth in the voting market is instructive as well. Voter turnout increased by roughly nine million voters between the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. About seven million of those additional voters came in large jurisdictions, while two million of the growth in turnout occurred in medium-sized jurisdictions. Turnout did not increase (in fact it decreased slightly) in small jurisdictions. Thus, there is a massive disparity in American election administration: a small number of local jurisdictions bear most of the responsibility for registering voters and holding elections, and their share of the burden is increasing.

[Figure 2 about here]

## **2. Jurisdiction Size and Basic Dimensions of Election Administration**

Some of our evidence comes from a national survey of local election officials conducted in early 2009 and from a survey of state election officials conducted in the summer of 2009. For the survey of local officials, we created a stratified sample based on the three jurisdiction size categories (small, medium and large) described above. To ensure representation of the largest jurisdictions all jurisdictions with over 50,000 voters in the 2004 general election were included in the sampling frame. We randomly sampled 2,000 medium-sized jurisdictions and 500 small jurisdictions. All told, our sample frame was 2,919 jurisdictions.

For each jurisdiction in the sampling frame, we sent the survey to the top election official (usually an elected county or town clerk, or an appointed election director). The preferred mode was via a web survey. However, not all jurisdictions had an email address – some jurisdictions had only postal mail contacts. Thus, some local officials were contacted by email to respond to an online survey instrument while other officials were sent a paper survey in the mail. All told, 795 surveys (27%) were sent via mail, 2,104 (72%) via email, and for 20 we could not obtain any contact information and therefore no type of instrument was sent. The vast majority of paper surveys sent by mail went to small and medium-sized jurisdictions.

The email survey included two reminders to non-respondents. The mail survey included one follow-up mailing to non-respondents. We received 900 surveys from local election officials, a response rate of 30.8%. The response rate for small jurisdictions (26%) is somewhat lower than the response rate for medium (31%) and large jurisdictions (37%). The response rate was the same (31%) for surveys completed by mail and those completed on the Internet. For the state survey, we sent questionnaires to all 50 state election officials (usually a Secretary of State) and received responses from 33 officials.

[Table 1 about here]

The survey of local officials included some questions that can be used to describe the magnitude of their election administration responsibilities. In Table 1 we compare the median jurisdiction in each size category on several measures of election administration. The data indicate that the basic dimensions of election administration are very different in large versus small jurisdictions. The typical small jurisdiction has one polling place, a handful of poll workers, and one staff person (the local official) who oversees polling place operations. Thus, in a small jurisdiction the local official can spend Election Day at the lone polling place and supervise all interactions between voters and poll workers.

A typical medium-sized jurisdiction in 2008 is somewhat larger, with five polling places, 40 poll workers and an additional staff person to coordinate polling place operations. The scale of election administration in medium-sized jurisdictions is still small enough that the local official can observe the voting experience at each polling place on Election Day. Election administration grows by at least an order of magnitude when moving to large jurisdictions. Regardless of the metric used (polling places, poll workers, budgets) large jurisdictions are at least 50 times bigger than small jurisdictions and roughly 20 times bigger than medium-sized jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it is impossible for the local official in a large jurisdiction to visit every polling place on Election Day. Election officials in large jurisdictions must delegate many important duties to other staff.

[Table 2 about here]

We examine similar measures from the 2010 Election Administration and Voting Survey in Table 2 and find approximately the same patterns. Although voter turnout was lower in the midterm election of 2010, the scale of election administration increases dramatically for large jurisdictions. Table 2 also indicates that the number of precincts is substantially bigger than the number of polling places in large jurisdictions but not in smaller jurisdictions. Thus, the practice of locating multiple precincts at the same polling place is largely confined to large jurisdictions. As we show below, this has an impact on the

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<sup>2</sup> We find very similar patterns when comparing jurisdictions of different sizes using data for the same election from the 2008 Election Administration and Voting Survey.

distribution of provisional ballots. Finally, there is also some evidence in both tables of economies of scale, with larger jurisdictions able to serve more voters per polling place than smaller jurisdictions. This may result in lower election administration costs on a per voter basis in large jurisdictions (see Hill 2011).

The basic dimensions measured by the number of voters, poll workers and staff only begin to explore the association between jurisdiction size and the task facing election officials. Large metropolitan jurisdictions share other features that make election administration different and more challenging.

### **3. Jurisdiction Size, Electoral Activity and Demographics**

In addition to the volume of voters they must serve in general elections, heavily populated local jurisdictions receive a disproportionate share of campaign-related activity in national and statewide elections. To paraphrase a frequently used expression, campaigns go hunting where the votes are. For example, presidential campaign appearances occur overwhelmingly in heavily populated locations (Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw 2002, 58; Chen and Reeves 2011, 544). The nine most visited counties in the 2008 presidential campaign are all large jurisdictions by our definition (Chen and Reeves 2011, 540). As one study summarizes the data:

“Candidate visits are in many ways an urban phenomenon, with a small number of especially populated urban and suburban counties attracting a relatively large number of appearances in any year. In contrast, the vast majority of counties are located in rural areas, and these typically receive very little attention from the campaigns” (Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw 2002, 58).

We suspect that other forms of campaign communication, such as television advertising, are also targeted toward the most densely populated media markets. It is also possible that coverage of political campaigns in traditional media outlets is heavier in large jurisdictions.

In addition to receiving a lopsided share of campaign communication, metropolitan regions with a populous central city tend to develop knowledge communities that attract a disproportionate share of wealth, highly educated people, and economic activity (Shaw 1997; Florida 2008). Thus, densely populated metropolitan areas also serve as the donor base for both major political parties in the United States (Gimpel, Lee and Kaminski 2006). Finally, large jurisdictions tend to produce more professional party organizations that serve as incubators for political ambition. As a result, Gimpel and colleagues (2011) observe that candidates for statewide office disproportionately emerge from the most densely populated counties in the United States.

[Figure 3 about here]

The net result of these findings is that election officials in large jurisdictions are likely to serve a more motivated and charged electorate in general elections. Perhaps one symptom of this pattern is that residual vote rates in presidential elections tend to be substantially higher in less populated rural jurisdictions. Figure 3 provides boxplots of residual vote rates in the 2008 presidential election. The top and bottom of each box indicates the 75<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentile observations respectively, while the horizontal line inside the box denotes the median case. As has been observed in previous elections (Ansolabehere and Stewart 2005, 383; Stewart 2006, 167), residual votes are much less common in large jurisdictions. The residual vote frequency in the median small jurisdiction is roughly twice as much as in the median large jurisdiction. The adoption of new voting technology spurred by HAVA has substantially reduced the frequency of residual votes in presidential elections, particularly in areas with high concentrations of low-income residents and racial and ethnic minorities (Stewart 2006; Kropf and Kimball 2012). As a result, HAVA has succeeded in reducing the residual vote rate in large jurisdictions, but not so much in smaller jurisdictions. The mobilizing influence of Barack Obama's campaign in large jurisdiction may account for some, but certainly not all, of this empirical pattern. As Stewart (2006, 167-168) notes, the strong relationship between jurisdiction size and residual votes, which persists after the adoption of new voting technology, deserves an explanation.

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

As implied above, densely populated jurisdictions tend to have a different demographic profile than smaller jurisdictions. We examine data from the 2000 census to characterize the population of local jurisdictions in the 2004 election. As Figures 4 and 5 indicate, large jurisdictions tend to have a much higher share of non-white and Latino residents than smaller jurisdictions.<sup>3</sup> Larger jurisdictions also tend to have a younger population. Perhaps reflecting the cosmopolitan character of their surroundings, election officials in large jurisdictions are younger, more educated, and more professionally connected than their counterparts in smaller jurisdictions (Kimball et al. 2010).

Furthermore, large jurisdictions have a more mobile population. As Figure 6 shows, large jurisdictions tend to have a smaller percentage of residents who have not moved in the past five years. More recent data from the American Community Survey indicate that mobility may be more pronounced in large jurisdictions (Benetsky and Koerber 2012). With more campaign activity and a more mobile population, large jurisdictions tend to produce a greater share of voter registration than expected given the size of their population. According to the 2008 Election Administration and Voting Survey, over 77 percent of the

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<sup>3</sup> The census codes race and ethnicity separately so the non-white percentages in Figure 4 do not include Latinos.

voter registrations received in the 2008 election cycle came in large jurisdictions.<sup>4</sup> A more mobile population also makes registered voters more difficult to track and produces a disproportionate share of problematic voter registrations in large jurisdictions. The same data indicate that of the 19.7 million registered voters on the inactive list in 2008, over 80 percent (nearly 16 million) resided in large jurisdictions.

[Figure 6 about here]

Finally, large metropolitan jurisdictions likely contain many more sub-governments (such as municipalities, school districts and other taxing districts) than smaller jurisdictions. These sub-governments have their own elections to select public officials, raise taxes, pass bond issues or change other policies. This makes for a longer ballot, more precincts and more ballot styles in general elections, and it makes for more off-cycle elections in large jurisdictions. All of these features of local government further complicate the task of planning and holding elections in large jurisdictions. In sum, the nature of local government, demographics and campaign activity produce added challenges for election officials in large jurisdictions. As a result, these officials are the ones most likely to support the need for innovation in election administration.

#### **4. Jurisdiction Size and Demand for Innovation**

Election officials in large jurisdictions are aware of the more challenging administrative tasks they face. We first examine demand for innovation in our survey of local election officials described above. The survey included nine questions about potential difficulties they may face in hiring poll workers (such as staffing the recruitment process, finding enough poll workers, or finding skilled poll workers). Election officials rated each recruitment challenge on a scale from 1 (“not at all difficult”) to 4 (“very difficult”). We create a scale by averaging responses to each of the nine questions.<sup>5</sup> Figure 7 provides a boxplot of scale scores for officials in each size category. As the graph indicates, large jurisdictions report substantially more difficulty in poll worker management than smaller jurisdictions.

[Figure 7 about here]

In response to these challenges, election officials in large jurisdictions engage in a slew of activities to recruit, train, evaluate, and compensate poll workers that are largely deemed unnecessary and tend not to be utilized in small jurisdictions (Kimball et al. 2010). In addition, officials in large jurisdictions are more supportive of reforms that might help

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<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the high rate of registration activity in 2008 was due to the unique nature of the Obama campaign for president. To address that possibility, we plan a comparable analysis of registration data from the 2010 election when EAC makes them available from the 2010 EAVS.

<sup>5</sup> The reliability of the scale for challenges in poll worker management (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) is .85.

them cope with the challenging voting population they must serve. For example, officials in large jurisdictions are more supportive of more staff and resources for poll worker recruiting (Kimball et al. 2010). Our survey of local officials included four questions about their support for new voting methods (vote centers, early voting, voting by mail, and Internet voting) that may help them manage the crush of voters who would otherwise appear entirely on Election Day. Election officials rated each policy on a scale from 1 (“Strongly Oppose”) to 5 (“Strongly Favor”) with 3 serving as the neutral point. We create a scale by averaging responses to each of the four policy questions and we graph the results in a boxplot (see Figure 8).<sup>6</sup> As the figure shows, officials in large jurisdictions are primarily on the side favoring these new voting methods, while officials in small jurisdictions are mostly on the side opposing these new voting methods.

[Figure 8 about here]

As another example, HAVA’s provisional voting requirements serve as a safety valve for jurisdictions dealing with rapid and large-scale changes to their registered voter list. Thus, it is no surprise that officials in large jurisdictions have much more favorable attitudes towards provisional voting than election officials in small jurisdictions (Kropf, Vercellotti, and Kimball 2010). The demand for innovation means that election officials in large jurisdictions are more likely to support reforms, such as HAVA, that are intended to help people vote.

The corollary is that officials in smaller jurisdictions tend to oppose reform proposals and they tend to be unhappy with new election laws. Surveys of local election officials observe some hostility toward HAVA (e.g., Moynihan and Silva 2008) but they have not examined whether the hostility is coming primarily from small jurisdictions. Another survey of local officials included an open-ended question about how HAVA was working in their jurisdiction. Officials from small jurisdictions were much more likely to offer comments (and particularly critical comments) about HAVA. Many of the negative comments focused on the increased costs of the HAVA mandates and their unhappiness with the federal government telling them how to run elections (Kropf and Kimball 2012). HAVA has likely polarized attitudes toward election reform among local officials based on the size of their jurisdiction.

## **5. Jurisdiction Size and Innovation in Election Administration**

Since the need for innovation in election administration is disproportionately felt among large jurisdictions, we expect that most innovation in local election administration occurs in large jurisdictions. To test this hypothesis, we examine data from the Election Assistance Commission’s Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). The survey asks state

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<sup>6</sup> The reliability of the scale for new voting methods (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) is .65.

and local jurisdictions to report the number of ballots cast in major elections in several categories. Thus, the survey measures the frequency of voting methods (including provisional voting, absentee voting, UOCAVA and early voting) that are alternatives to the tradition of casting a regular ballot at a polling place on Election Day. We analyze EAVS data from the 2008 and 2010 elections to determine the proportion of each ballot type cast in the three jurisdiction size categories (see Tables 3 and 4).

[Tables 3 and 4 about here]

The EAVS data indicate that ballots cast by alternative methods occur disproportionately in large jurisdictions. For example, even though roughly 70 percent of total ballots and ballots cast on Election Day are produced in large jurisdictions, over 90 percent of provisional ballots and over 80 percent of absentee and UOCAVA ballots appear in large jurisdictions. In particular, partially accepted provisional ballots (almost 120,000 in 2008) and undeliverable absentee ballots (over 220,000 in 2008) occur almost entirely in large jurisdictions. Meanwhile, most forms of provisional and absentee ballots occur at near *de minimis* levels in small jurisdictions. Among the alternative balloting methods in Tables 3 and 4, only early votes are cast in rough proportion to the overall number of voters in each type of jurisdiction.

In the 2008 election there were over 820,000 rejected absentee ballots and over 500,000 rejected or partially rejected provisional ballots in large jurisdictions. Given the heightened racial and ethnic diversity in large jurisdictions, these numbers may raise concerns about the disparate impact of absentee and provisional voting in the United States. Furthermore, since HAVA's voting technology requirements have significantly reduced the frequency of residual votes, provisional and absentee ballots now outnumber residual ballots in national elections (Kropf and Kimball 2012, 113-114). Legal and partisan disputes over election administration and ballot recounts are now more likely to focus on the disposition of absentee and provisional ballots rather than residual votes. This will further the importance of jurisdiction size as election litigation should be concentrated even more in large local jurisdictions.

One additional measure provided by the EAVS data asks about the use of electronic poll books to sign in voters, update voter history, and look up polling places. In 2008 and 2010, roughly one-third of large jurisdictions reported using electronic poll books while 16 percent of medium-sized jurisdictions and just 3 percent of small jurisdictions used electronic poll books.<sup>7</sup> It seems obvious that jurisdictions serving large numbers of voters

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<sup>7</sup> Electronic poll books have been adopted statewide in some states (such as Georgia, Maryland, and Utah). We find a similar relationship between jurisdiction size and the use of electronic poll books when these states are excluded from the analysis.

are more likely to turn toward more modern technological methods of keeping track of who is registered.

Innovation in election administration can come in many other forms that are not measured by the EAVS or other surveys. We create a final indicator of innovation by examining organizations and associations that work directly with local election officials. We examined best practices manuals and other reports produced by EAC, Pew, and Election Center and coded each instance in which innovation in local election administration was recognized (the sources for this analysis are listed in the appendix). All told, we recorded 315 cases of recognized innovation: 94 percent cited large jurisdictions, 6 percent cited a medium-sized jurisdiction, and none mentioned a small jurisdiction. This suggests that Election Center and best practices guides basically provide a way for officials from large jurisdictions to communicate with each other about innovative administrative practices. Nevertheless, with innovations concentrated heavily in large jurisdictions, there is yet another reason to expect that partisan and legal disputes over election administration also tend to occur in large jurisdictions.

## **6. Jurisdiction Size and Partisanship**

There are several reasons to expect that partisan disputes over election laws and administration tend to focus on large local jurisdictions. If campaigns or litigators want to have the greatest impact on election outcomes, then they will target jurisdictions with the most voters. A more mobile population in large jurisdictions also increases conflict over voter registration status and provisional and absentee ballots. Finally, as Lewis (2011) notes, large cities tend to have more competitive elections (either intra-party or inter-party) and more active party organizations, additional ingredients for election law disputes.

One consequence of the partisan and legal focus on large jurisdictions relates to polarized attitudes toward election reform policies. Republicans tend to prefer policies (such as photo identification requirements) that protect against voter fraud but may increase barriers to voter participation, while Democrats tend to prefer policies (such as Election Day registration) that improve access to the franchise but may increase opportunities for fraud (Hasen 2012; Kimball and Kropf 2012). Since these disputes tend to be focused on large jurisdictions, we do not expect polarized preferences over these policies to trickle down to officials in smaller jurisdictions.

Most local election officials in the United States are affiliated with one of the two major political parties, and many are chosen for their position in partisan elections (Kimball and Kropf 2006). Our surveys of state and local election officials included two questions about anti-fraud policies (photo ID and no-match, no vote laws) and two questions about policies to increase access (Election Day registration and universal registration). Each policy was

evaluated on a scale from 1 (“Strongly oppose”) to 5 (“Strongly favor”). We created an anti-fraud scale by averaging responses to two relevant policy items, and we created an increased access scale in a similar fashion.

[Figure 9 about here]

We plot average support for anti-fraud policies among state and local officials in Figure 9. We find that partisan differences in policy preferences among election officials are evident among officials at the state level and in large jurisdictions, but not in small or medium-sized jurisdictions. Among officials serving states and large local jurisdictions, a majority of Democrats oppose anti-fraud policies and a majority of Republicans support anti-fraud policies. These partisan differences are statistically significant. Among officials in small and medium-sized jurisdictions the partisan differences are smaller and statistically insignificant. In particular, Democratic officials in larger jurisdictions are more opposed to anti-fraud policies than their fellow partisans in smaller jurisdictions. When examining policies to ease access to voter registration, we find also find that partisan differences among election officials only exist for those serving states and large jurisdictions, with Republican officials more opposed to those policies. Given that election officials in large jurisdictions tend to internalize party positions on voter access and voter integrity issues can only add to the contentious nature of election law and administration disputes that take place under their watch.

## **7. Jurisdiction Size and Election Reform**

Because of the skewed distribution of the size of local jurisdictions, we suspect that election reform debates in many states are dominated by election officials from small and medium-sized jurisdictions, even though they serve a relatively small share of voters. For example, Missouri has 116 local jurisdictions that administer elections. Only ten of the local jurisdictions in Missouri are large by our classification, but they serve more than half of the state’s voters in national elections. Officials in the largest jurisdictions have been pressing for legislation to allow early voting and to eliminate February elections (a cost-saving measure for large jurisdictions). However, according to staff from the large jurisdictions in Missouri, they have been unsuccessful because election officials in smaller counties are opposed and have more influence in the state capitol. In addition, some Missouri legislators are former county clerks in rural parts of the state, which further strengthens the hand of officials from small jurisdictions in legislative debates.

As another example, a recent study of the impact of proposed election reforms in Colorado was based on a survey of county clerks (Cuciti and Wallis 2011). The survey included questions about policies such as moving the registration deadline closer to Election Day, voting by mail, and whether to mail ballots to voters on the inactive list. Even though large counties serve over 80 percent of the state’s voters, they are outnumbered by smaller

counties by a 5-to-1 ratio. In the Colorado policy analysis each county clerk was given equal weight, which has the effect of giving voters in small counties more influence than voters in large counties. Applying such a unit rule in legislating would lead to policies that are opposed by officials who serve the vast majority of the state's voters.

In how many states might election officials serving large jurisdictions be at a disadvantage before policymakers? We answer this by examining the ratio of large jurisdictions to small and medium-sized jurisdictions in each state (see Table 5).<sup>8</sup> States where large jurisdictions are outnumbered by a ratio of 10-to-1 or more are coded as rural dominant states. Depending on how size is evaluated in the three upper Midwestern states, there are 15 to 18 states in this category. States with less than a 10-to-1 ratio but more than a 2-1 ratio are labeled rural advantage states (17 to 20 states). There are six states where large jurisdictions are at rough parity with smaller jurisdictions. Finally, in two urban advantage states (Hawaii and New Jersey) large jurisdictions outnumber smaller jurisdictions by a 2-to-1 margin or more.

[Table 5 about here]

Legal and political conflict between densely populated urban areas and less populated rural areas are nothing new in the United States (Key 1964; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2008; Gross 2010; Gimpel and Karnes 2006). Observers tend to locate these conflicts around issues involving cultural values, the distribution of government benefits, and electoral support for the two major parties. Election administration should be added to this list. In most states, election officials serving heavily populated jurisdictions find themselves at a numerical disadvantage when competing with other local officials to influence policymakers.

## **8. Implications of Jurisdiction Size**

Densely populated local jurisdictions are substantially different than smaller jurisdictions in just about every measurable indicator of election administration. This is due not only to the size of the voting population they serve, but also the nature of the voting population and political campaigns in their areas. HAVA appears to have accelerated some of these differences in election administration. In addition, HAVA has polarized support for election reform among local election officials along the size dimension.

There are several implications of these findings, for researchers, policymakers, and the legal and reform communities. On the research front, studies of local practices and the views of local election officials should be aware of the importance of jurisdiction size. When examining a sample of local jurisdictions it would be wise to use a research design that

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<sup>8</sup> The table leaves out Delaware (which has only large local jurisdictions) and Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Wyoming (which have no large jurisdictions).

stratifies local jurisdictions by the size of the electorate. In addition, researchers using the local jurisdiction as the unit of analysis to examine voting behavior outputs (such as turnout) of election administration should consider weighting the data by the size of the electorate, which has the effect of counting each voter equally (e.g., Stewart 2006; Kropf and Kimball 2012).

On the policy front, policymakers should be aware of how many voters a local election official serves when considering that official's opinion about reform proposals. Legislators probably will not respond well to testimony from an urban election official who claims that his opinions should count one hundred times more than the views of the rural county clerk who will testify after him. However, policymakers should appreciate that local officials who serve most voters in a state have added expertise about the voting experience facing most voters in that state. Furthermore, the lawmakers should consider whether current laws mandate uniformity in election administration at the expense of common sense. As Doug Chapin (2012) recently argues, election laws should provide more flexibility to allow large jurisdictions to pursue some innovations (such as Internet voter registration or election consolidation) that smaller jurisdictions may not want or need. Because of the potent opposition to reform from small and medium-sized jurisdictions, this approach may allow large jurisdictions to go it alone in areas where they want to modernize election administration. A final approach to the size disparity in election administration would be for the large jurisdictions to find common cause through their own advocacy organization. While large jurisdictions may be at a disadvantage within their respective states, they may find sympathetic ears in Congress if they were to speak with a (somewhat) unified voice on these important issues.

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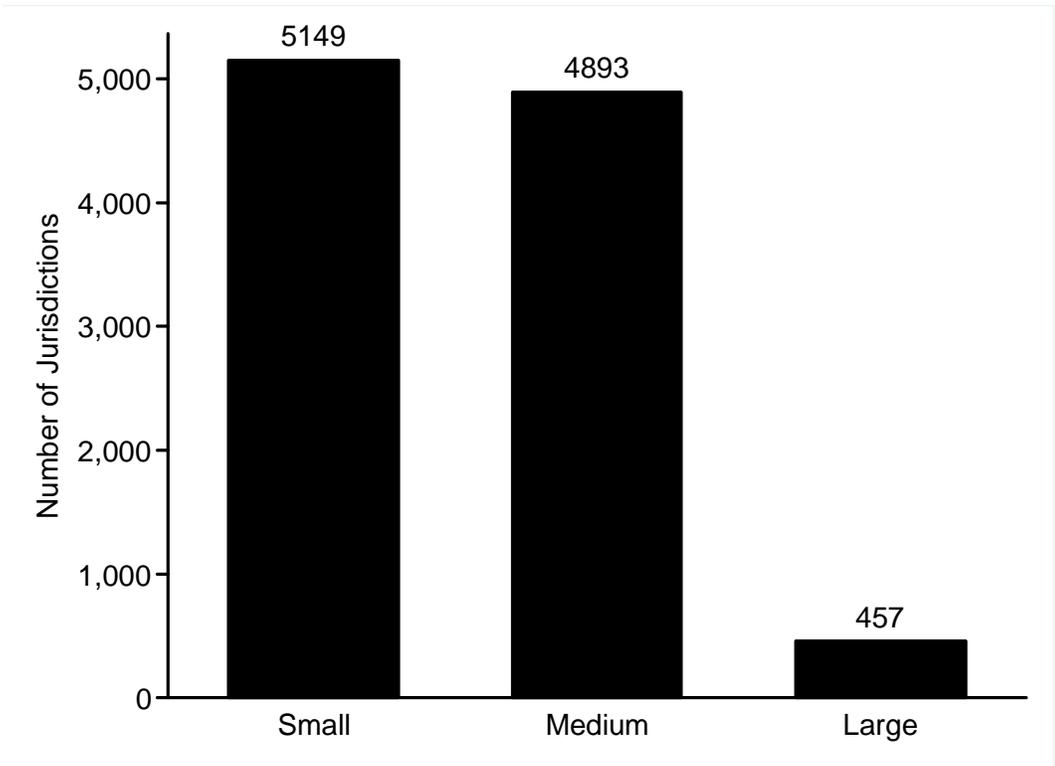
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## Appendix

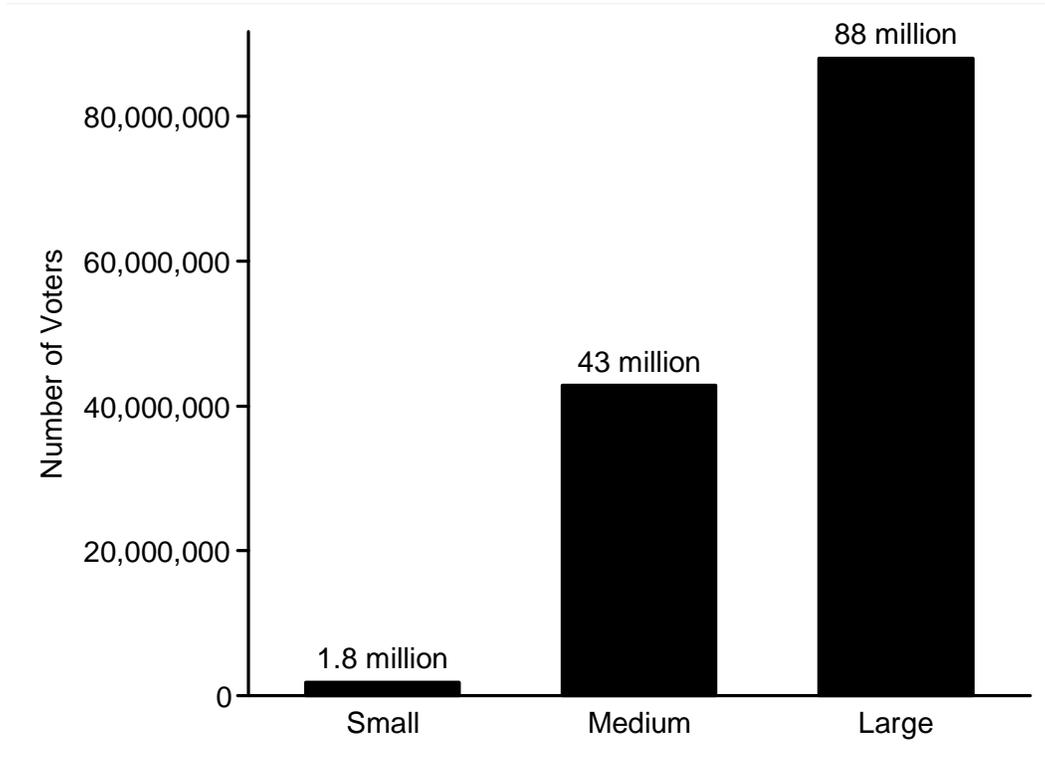
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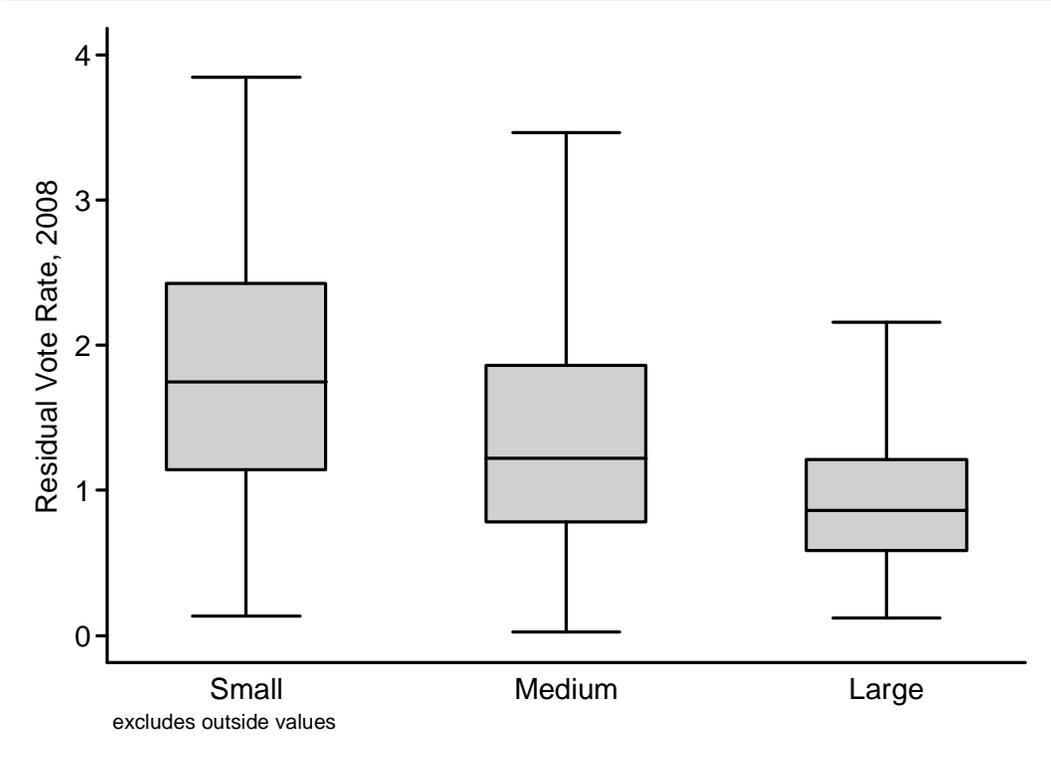
**Figure 1**  
**Number of Local Election Jurisdictions by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2008 General Election**



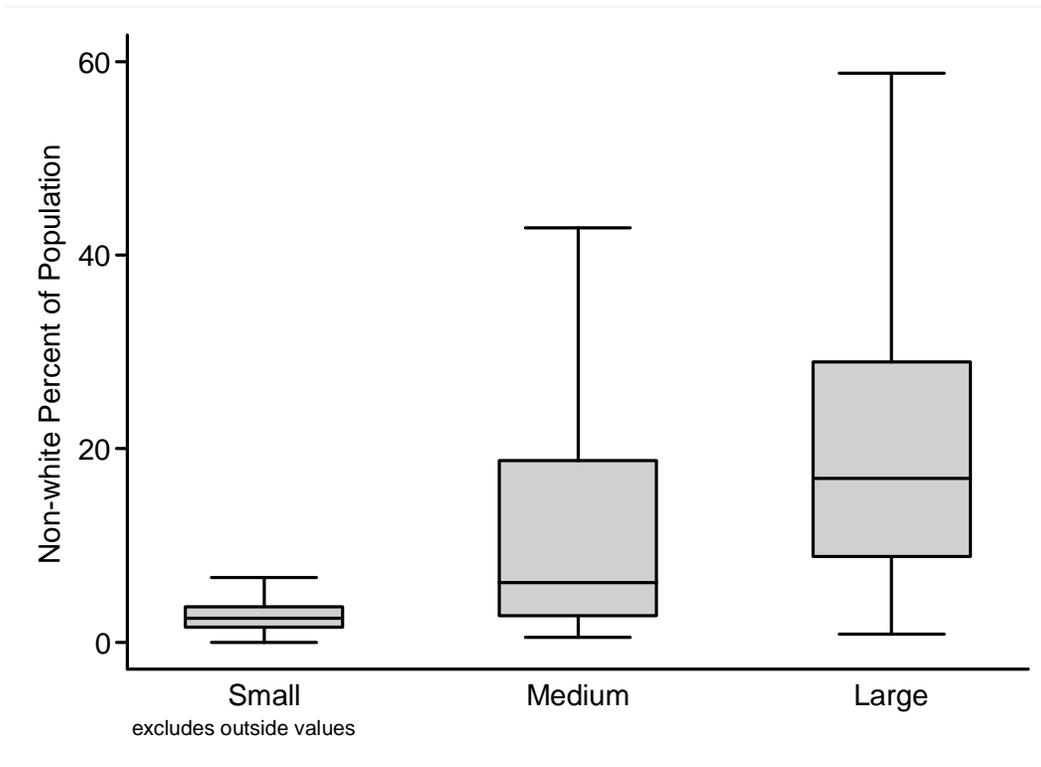
**Figure 2**  
**Number of Voters by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2008 General Election**



**Figure 3**  
**Residual Vote Rate by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2008 Presidential Election**

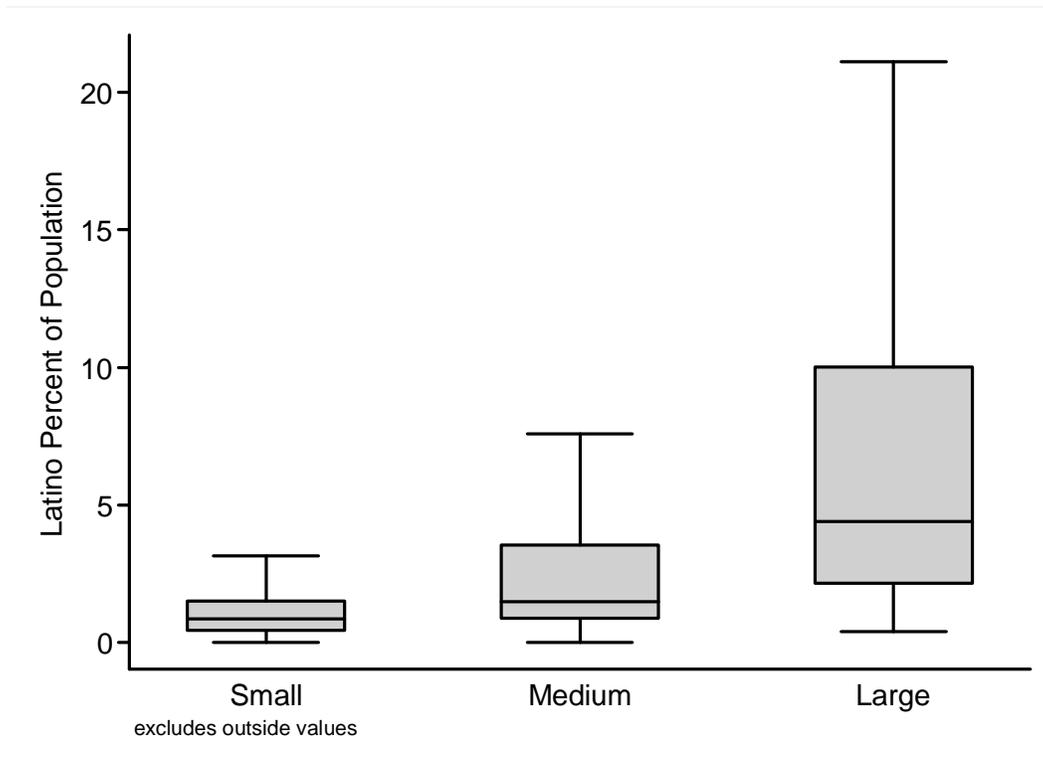


**Figure 4**  
**Non-White Share of Population by Size of Jurisdiction**



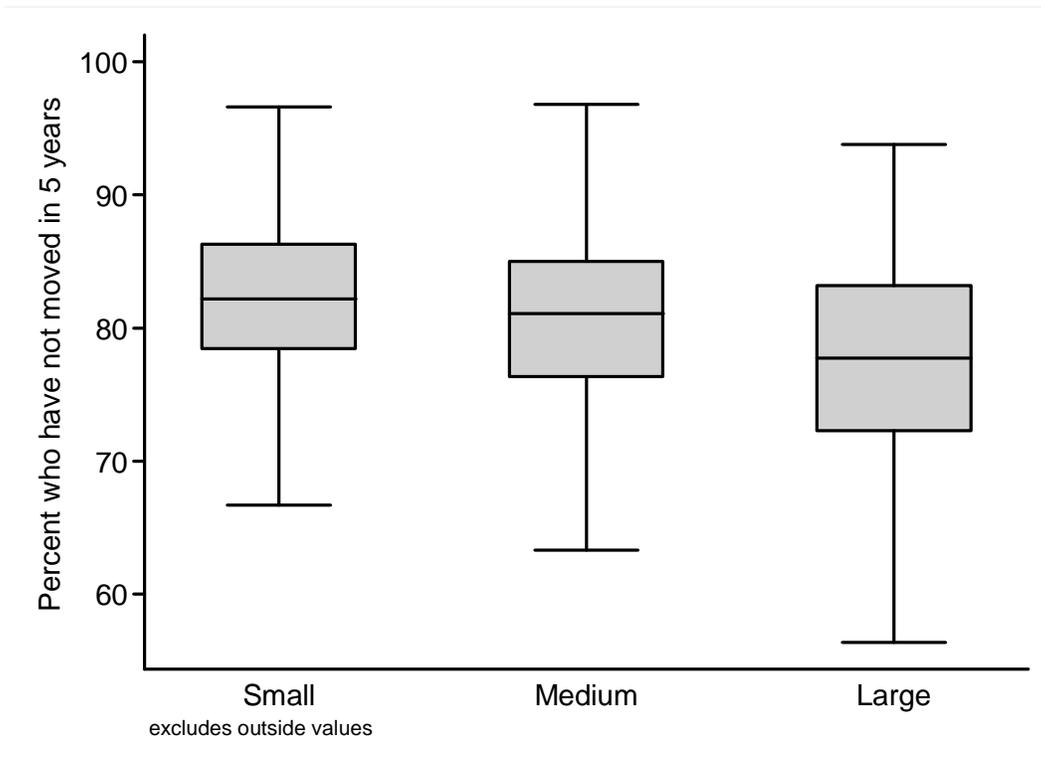
Demographic data are from the 2000 census.

**Figure 5**  
**Latino Share of Population by Size of Jurisdiction**



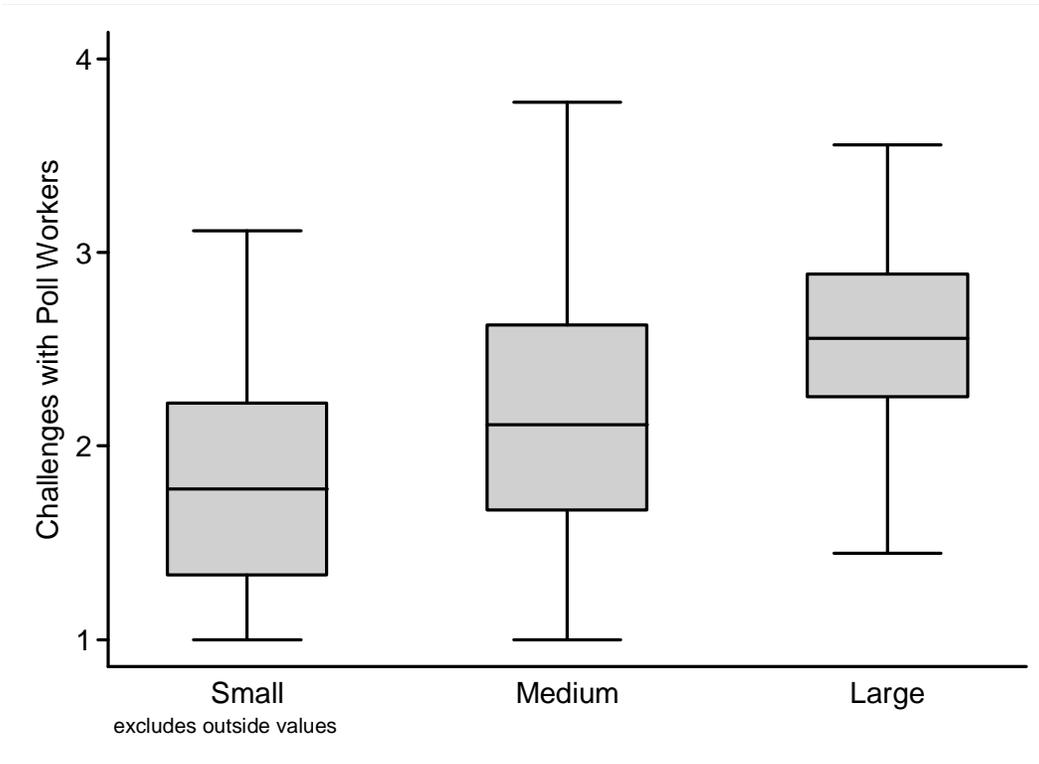
Demographic data are from the 2000 census.

**Figure 6**  
**Residential Stability by Size of Jurisdiction**

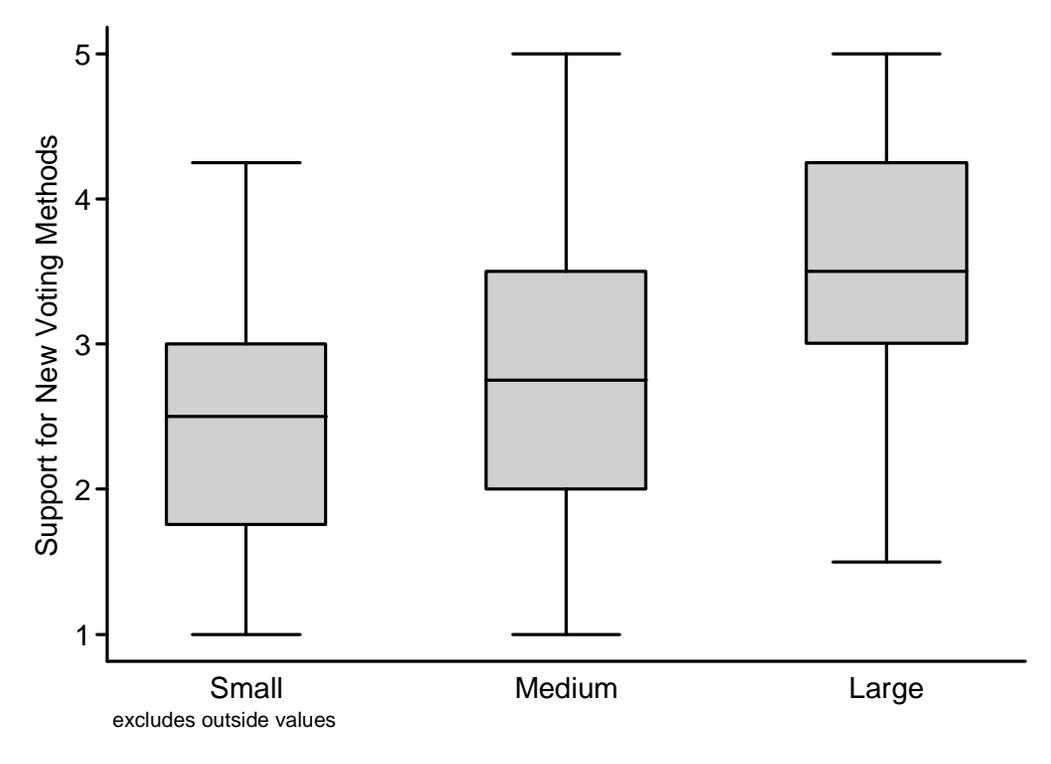


Demographic data are from the 2000 census.

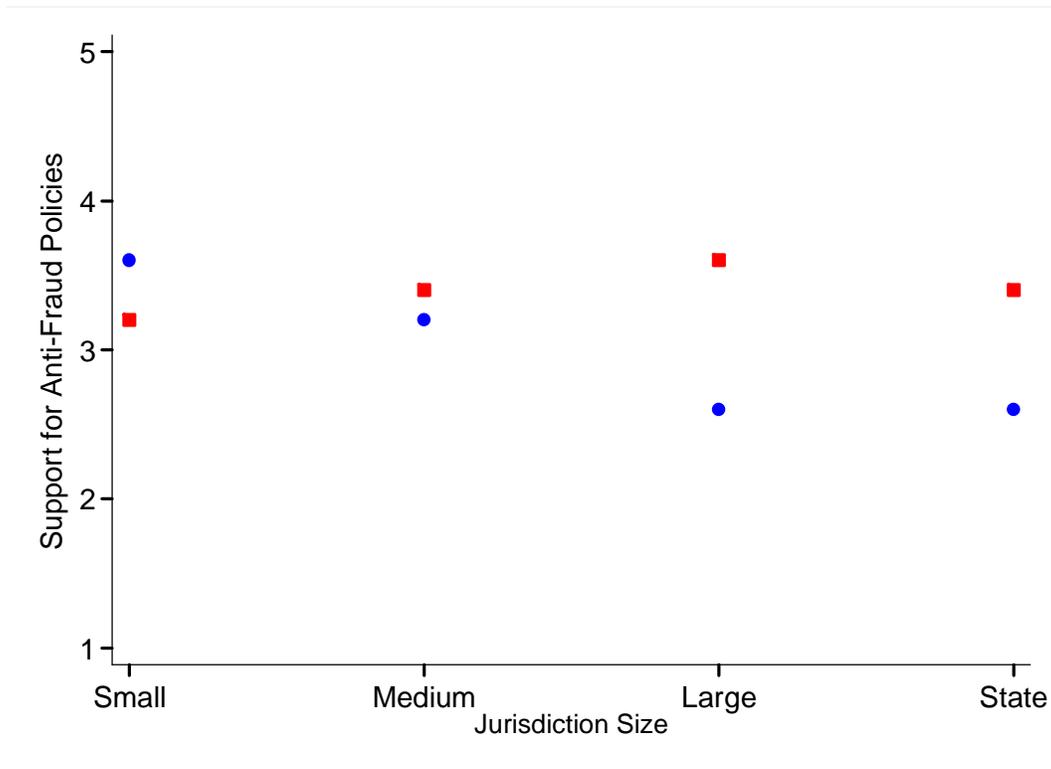
**Figure 7**  
**Challenges with Poll Workers by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2008 General Election**



**Figure 8**  
**Support for New Voting Methods by Size of Jurisdiction**



**Figure 9**  
**Support for Anti-Fraud Policies by Size of Jurisdiction**



Squares represent Republican officials.  
Circles represent Democratic officials.

**Table 1**  
**The Shape of Polling Place Operations by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2008 General Election**

	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
<b>Polling Places</b>	1	5	94
<b>Poll Workers</b>	5	40	753
<b>Staff dedicated to poll workers</b>	1	2	5
<b>Ballots cast</b>	427	4900	112,621
<b>Budget for poll worker operations in 2008</b>	\$225	\$1,000	\$45,000
<b>Voters per polling place</b>	427	980	1,198

Source: Kimball et al. (2010)

Figures in the table represent the median jurisdiction in each size category.

**Table 2**  
**The Shape of Polling Place Operations by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2010 General Election**

	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
<b>Polling Places</b>	1	11	84
<b>Precincts</b>	1	13	119
<b>Poll Workers</b>	7	60	600
<b>Ballots cast</b>	365	5,392	71,312
<b>Voters per polling place</b>	365	490	849

Figures in the table represent the median jurisdiction in each size category.

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2011)

**Table 3**  
**Share of Ballot by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2008 General Election**

	<b>Jurisdiction Size</b>		
	<b>Small</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Large</b>
<b>Total ballots cast</b>	0.3%	29.8%	69.9%
<b>Election Day ballots</b>	0.3%	30.0%	69.7%
<b>Provisional ballots cast</b>	0.02%	10.4%	89.6%
<b>Provisional ballots rejected</b>	0.02%	15.3%	84.7%
<b>Provisionals partly accepted</b>	0.02%	3.0%	97.0%
<b>Provisionals counted in full</b>	0.02%	9.1%	90.9%
<b>Domestic absentees sent</b>	0.2%	23.0%	76.8%
<b>Undeliverable absentees</b>	0.03%	5.6%	94.4%
<b>Domestic absentees returned</b>	0.3%	22.9%	76.9%
<b>Spoiled/replaced absentees</b>	0.1%	10.9%	89.0%
<b>Domestic absentees rejected</b>	0.04%	19.9%	80.1%
<b>Domestic absentees counted</b>	0.2%	22.1%	77.7%
<b>UOCAVA ballots</b>	0.1%	17.4%	82.5%
<b>Early voting ballots</b>	0.04%	27.2%	72.7%

Figures in the table represent the share of ballots occurring in each size category.  
 Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2009)

**Table 4**  
**Share of Ballot by Size of Jurisdiction**  
**2010 General Election**

	<b>Jurisdiction Size</b>		
	<b>Small</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Large</b>
<b>Total ballots cast</b>	0.3%	29.8%	70.0%
<b>Election Day ballots</b>	0.3%	31.4%	68.3%
<b>Provisional ballots cast</b>	0.02%	8.9%	91.1%
<b>Provisional ballots rejected</b>	0.03%	13.1%	86.9%
<b>Provisionals partly accepted</b>	none	2.0%	98.0%
<b>Provisionals counted in full</b>	0.01%	8.7%	91.3%
<b>Domestic absentees sent</b>	0.2%	17.3%	82.6%
<b>Undeliverable absentees</b>	0.01%	9.4%	90.6%
<b>Domestic absentees returned</b>	0.2%	19.6%	80.3%
<b>Spoiled/replaced absentees</b>	0.1%	13.2%	86.7%
<b>Domestic absentees rejected</b>	0.1%	18.0%	81.9%
<b>Domestic absentees counted</b>	0.2%	19.4%	80.4%
<b>UOCAVA ballots</b>	0.4%	19.8%	79.8%
<b>Early voting ballots</b>	0.07%	28.7%	71.2%

Figures in the table represent the share of ballots occurring in each size category.  
 Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2011)

**Table 5**  
**Representation of Large Jurisdictions in American States**

<b>Small Jurisdictions Dominate</b>	<b>Advantage for Small Jurisdictions</b>	<b>Rough Parity</b>	<b>Advantage for Large Jurisdictions</b>
Arkansas	Alabama	Arizona	Hawaii
Iowa	Colorado	California	New Jersey
Idaho	Georgia	Florida	
Kansas	Illinois	Maryland	
Kentucky	Indiana	New York	
Massachusetts	Louisiana	Pennsylvania	
Michigan (muni)	Michigan (counties)		
Minnesota (muni)	Minnesota (counties)		
Missouri	Nevada		
Mississippi	New Mexico		
Montana	North Carolina		
North Dakota	Ohio		
Nebraska	Oregon		
Oklahoma	South Carolina		
Rhode Island	Tennessee		
South Dakota	Texas		
Wisconsin (muni)	Utah		
West Virginia	Virginia		
	Washington		
	Wisconsin (counties)		