



# Recruiting College-Age Poll Workers

*[Major portions of the cited documents<sup>i</sup> were excerpted with permission.]*  
*Edited by Marge Acosta, Huntington League of Women Voters*

## Introduction

The goal of the League of Women Voters of NYS is to help implement programs for recruiting and retaining young, tech-savvy poll workers to assist in providing smooth-running elections with new HAVA-compliant electronic voting systems.

America's poll workers number two million per federal election. Poll workers, whose average age nationwide currently is 72, typically work days that exceed 12 hours and receive minimum wage or only slightly higher in most of the country. In New York, where the work day is 15-16 hours, compensation ranges from \$75 to \$325 per day based on rates set by the county boards of elections.<sup>ii</sup>

A well-staffed polling place with well-trained workers functions smoothly, allowing the maximum number of voters to cast ballots in a convenient fashion. Voters who need assistance can get it, and polls open and close in accordance with state law.

There is a critical shortage of poll workers in the US, which has directly affected the enfranchisement of many voters. The U.S. was 600,000 poll workers short of the number needed to run a smooth election in the November, 2004 presidential election!<sup>iii</sup> In addition, new machines may mean some poll workers will choose to opt out of working on Election Day because of their fear or unfamiliarity with the new machines, leaving an even greater potential gap at the polls to be filled by new recruits.

A scramble to find replacements has led to a number of different strategies around the country, from cross-training workers so they can perform numerous jobs in polling places to pulling any voters available in a precinct and putting them to work in whatever task they can handle.

## US Election Assistance Commission Guidebook on Recruiting College Poll Workers

Many states are turning to college recruitment programs to supply needed tech-savvy poll workers, and the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has created a guidebook based on successful programs in various states.

Every practice recommended in the guidebook has been tested in the field by election professionals and college/university staff and faculty. The strategies and practices are based on three criteria: they must be practical, replicable, and sustainable.

## College Student Strengths and Challenges

### Strengths:

- College students are highly intelligent and accustomed to learning new things.
- They tend to be comfortable with computers and other new technologies and may bring skills that can solve technology-related problems. These skills are increasingly important, given the greater use of electronic polling equipment.
- They have enough energy and enthusiasm to get through a long day at the polls.
- They are usually strong enough to carry supplies and set up heavy equipment.
- They often have flexible schedules.

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### Challenges:

- Some State laws may limit or prohibit the use of nonresident college students as poll workers.
- In addition to requiring an effective election jurisdiction program, student poll worker programs require an effective campus recruitment and management process. These programs require a substantial investment of time to design, implement, and manage.
- Although students are often enthusiastic and more available for poll work than people who are fully employed, many interests and commitments compete for students' time and attention. Special retention techniques should be used to sustain their interest in poll work and their reliability as workers.

### **Examples of College Recruitment Programs**

- Making poll work a class requirement by building it into the curriculum as a service-learning assignment.
- Running a recruitment campaign with posters, information tables, mass e-mails, media coverage, and peer recruiters.
- Classes/Departments such as political science can award extra credit points for any student in an introductory course who served as a poll worker.
- Creating a new class around poll worker programs, including the required election training, additional training by the school, and seminars on political participation, and the democratic process. Some are 4-week seminars, while others are semester-long courses, offering from one to three credits.
- Related departments, such as career services, can send an e-mail to all students announcing an Election Day job opportunity as a poll worker.

### **Citizens Union Foundation – 2006 Poll Worker Recruitment Program**

Citizens Union Foundation (CUF) has worked to recruit New Yorkers to serve as stand by Election Day poll workers since 2001. Their poll worker recruitment project seeks to address the shortage of poll workers that inevitably occurs each Primary and Election Day. Efforts are geared toward encouraging citizens outside of New York's partisan political party structure to participate in the poll worker program to assist voters in casting their ballots.

CUF also sees a largely untapped resource in a younger generation of poll worker applicants that are well equipped to handle the demands that new poll site procedures and machines will require. The federal Elections Assistance Commission provided CUF with a grant to recruit poll workers between the ages of 18-24, as part of their "Help America Vote College Poll Worker" program.

### **Compared to their 2005 work, CUF's 2006 number goals and achievements were as follows:**

	2005 Actual	2006 Goal	2006 Actual
Total Poll Workers	1,357	1,500	3,313
Language Interpreters	314	500	579
College Age Poll Workers	N/A	500	1,326

CUF exceeded all goals by recruiting 3,313 total poll worker applicants, 579 of which were language interpreters—200 more than the 314 recruited in 2005—and 1,326 of which were college age. CUF solicited surveys from all of their applicants and received 317 responses. Their report includes findings from their recruitment efforts and survey results.

CUF has used some rather creative strategies with very interesting findings.

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*\*\*The League of Women Voters of New York State is a unique, multi-issue, nonpartisan, political organization. It encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy. \*\**

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### 2006 Poll Worker Recruitment Program Key Findings

1. Internet recruitment strategies and efforts proved to be the most cost effective method and easiest method of recruitment, especially when coupled with the more streamlined online application process CUF implemented in 2006 though not yet replicated by the Board of Elections. Greater resources and emphasis should be placed into such recruitment efforts to increase the available pool of desperately needed poll workers.
2. There remains a strong need for poll workers to have more hands-on training in the form of practicing before each election -- as opposed to simple text book learning. Practicing through the use of role playing situations should always include the use of, and training on, actual voting machines.
3. Demand for onsite language interpreters exceeds the number of such workers who are trained and available to work. This demand will only continue to rise in future years. More active and aggressive recruitment is needed of this vital group of poll workers in order to serve the federally required needs of this voting population.
4. With the long delayed but soon to be expected use of new voting machines, it will be important that poll workers who are more comfortable with the newer technology, such as college-age young adults, be recruited to replace those who may choose to no longer work because of this shift to newer technologically different machines.
5. Too often poll workers mishandled the request for identification and the use of affidavit ballots resulting in the unnecessary disenfranchisement of certain voters. This failure indicates a need for more comprehensive training on HAVA mandated identification procedures and proper poll site practices to ensure that no voter is unnecessarily denied the right to vote because of a lack of knowledge on the part of the poll worker.

### Poll Worker Program Recommendations to NYC Board of Elections

1. Recruitment and Application Processing
  - a. Expand efforts to recruit poll workers online. In addition, use online methods of communication to streamline the application process and stay in touch with applicants.
  - b. Increase the financial compensation for poll workers from the maximum of \$460, if they work on both the primary and general election days, to something much higher and more appealing.
  - c. Implement a Voluntary Municipal Employee Poll Worker Program that allows nonemergency city employees to serve at the polls on the day of the General Election.
  - d. Training
2. Require all poll workers, regardless of past experience, to attend training before each election cycle, including returning poll workers.
  - a. Offer a more practical "hands-on" experience including the demonstration of voting machines during the training of Election Day procedures.
  - b. Enhance and strengthen the online component to the training process, allowing poll workers to refresh their skills before Election Day.
  - c. Emphasize and clarify HAVA identification requirements in training sessions to ensure no one is unnecessarily asked for identification, including improper forms.
  - d. Offer real life scenarios for poll workers to practice Affidavit Ballot procedures so that voters whose registrations may be flawed through the fault of the system are not disenfranchised and therefore are allowed to cast their vote on an Affidavit ballot so that their registration can later be verified or not.
3. Election Day Operation
  - a. Coordinators should contact all poll site personnel prior to Election Day to ensure greater and timelier attendance.

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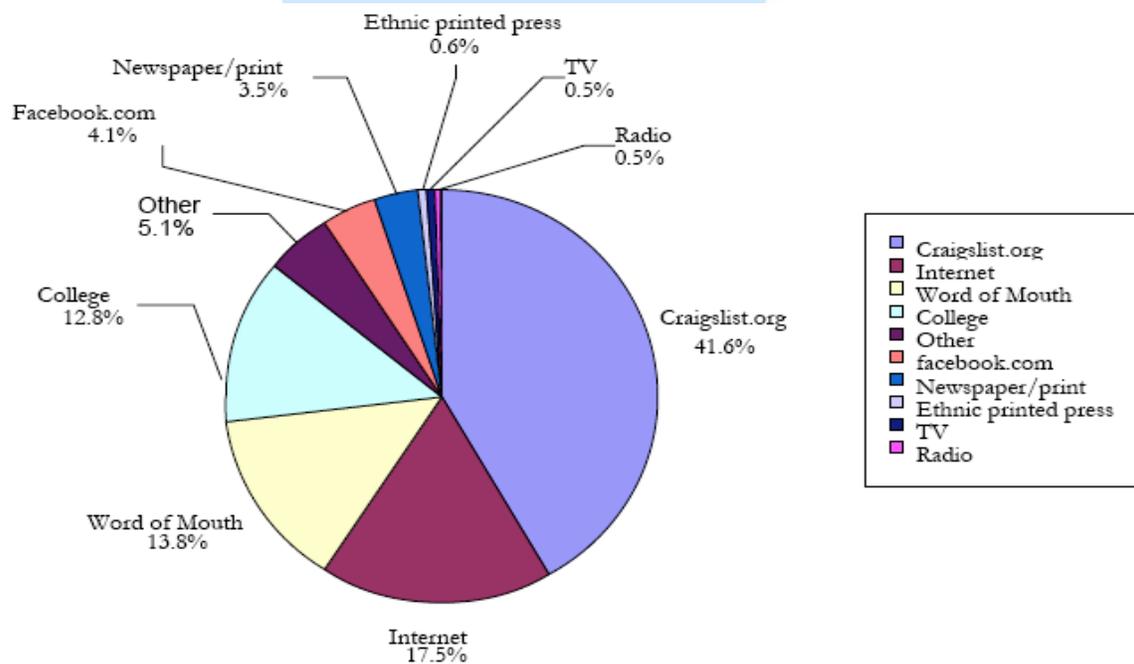
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- b. Implement stronger enforcement of the existing rules and penalties. As outlined in the NYC BOE Poll Worker Manuel, poll workers who exhibit unacceptable behavior or fail to adhere to the tasks required in the manual are subject to penalties and fines.
- c. Ensure that all poll sites have required language materials on Election Day by utilizing available statistics on district demographics and language needs, and responding to problem areas in the future.
- d. Increase use of local and ethnic press to recruit language interpreters.
- e. Include HAVA identification requirement procedures on Voter's Bill of Rights that are supplied at the polls.

### College Age Poll Worker Recruitment Program

Despite the delays the state and city have experienced implementing new voting machines, a new voting system in New York City is inevitable and when that time does arrive, it will be important that poll workers not only can operate new electronic machines but will be able to assist voters who have likely never used anything other than New York's antiquated Shoup lever machines, at the polls. Tech savvy poll workers will be in high demand and a younger generation of poll worker may be more comfortable with the new voting machines. With evidence that electoral participation of 18-24 years old is in decline since the 1971 passage of the twenty-sixth amendment lowering the voting age to 18, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission developed the HAVA College Poll Worker program as a way to address both the need for additional poll workers across the country and the importance of engaging more 18-24 year olds in the electoral process. With the support of the EAC, Citizens Union recruited 1,326 poll worker applicants between the ages of 18-24, in 2006.



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CUF developed a recruitment strategy for college age applicants that incorporated internet recruitment, outreach and traditional methods of recruitment, and partnerships with academic institutions. They conducted an expansive and comprehensive Internet recruitment and outreach strategy that was based on the development of their website, online poll worker applications, online postings and advertisements, and online social networks. As the chart above shows, online recruitment proved to be their most successful method with this age group, yielding 63.2% of the total applicants in the 18-24 year old age range. Craigslist.org was the largest source for applications, having provided CUF with 41.6% of their 18-24 year old applicants.

To supplement their Internet outreach efforts, CUF also used traditional methods of recruitment by developing PSAs to be announced on radio and flyers to be printed in relevant publications or be distributed on college campuses. Word of mouth, newspaper ads and coverage also proved to be some of their more successful recruitment sources. In addition, flyers were distributed at summer events around the city, including Shakespeare in the Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park's "Movies with a View" series.

Working to build a relationship with academic institutions in recruiting college students to serve as poll workers, CUF reached out primarily to the CUNY systems, but also to various student organizations in colleges across the city. CUF contacted college counselors and encouraged them to include information about CUF poll worker program on their bulletins, and also sent flyers, found in Appendix C of CUF's report, to all of the CUNY campuses, along with Fordham and Columbia Universities.

### Success of CUF Program

The dramatic improvements in the number of poll workers recruited by CUF in 2006 over 2004 and 2005 were slightly dampened by a decrease in the number of CUF applicants the NYC BOE contacted in 2006. In 2004, of those who submitted applications to CUF, 49% were never contacted by the City BOE. In contrast, only 9.7% of respondents were never contacted by the BOE in 2005, a dramatic and welcomed change. In 2006, that percentage increased to 16.6% of survey respondents having said that the BOE never contacted them to train or work on Election Day. However, CUF's efforts are geared toward encouraging citizens outside of New York's partisan political party structure to participate in the poll worker program. Therefore, this increase may be attributed to the increased number of applications CUF sent to the BOE, nearly double the amount from 2005, and the inability of the BOE to handle such an increase in applications for standby workers outside of the two party system.

Lastly, CUF's survey results revealed that most of their applicants had a positive experience with the Poll Worker Program. Despite issues with training, placement, or observed problems on Election Day, respondents in general expressed a willingness to serve in the future.

For more details on both the Election Assistance Commission guidebook and the Citizen Union Foundation report see:

- EAC Guidebook on Recruiting College Poll Workers:  
[www.eac.gov/files/BPPollWorker/College\\_Guidebook.pdf](http://www.eac.gov/files/BPPollWorker/College_Guidebook.pdf)
- Citizens Union Foundation (CUF), 2006 Poll Worker Recruitment Program  
[http://www.citizensunion.org/programs\\_reports/2006\\_PollWorker\\_Report.pdf](http://www.citizensunion.org/programs_reports/2006_PollWorker_Report.pdf)

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<sup>i</sup> US Election Assistance Commission Guidebook on Recruiting College Poll Workers, July 2007 and Citizen Union Foundation (CUF), 2006 Poll Worker Recruitment Program. Permission was granted by Dick Dadey, Executive Director of CUF.

<sup>ii</sup> Electionline.org Helping Americans Vote: Poll Workers

<sup>iii</sup> Website, League of Women Voters of Massachusetts