

HOURLY NEWS
WBEZ Chicago
 LIVE Now
 On Air Now
 PLAYLIST

REVIEWED
 By Chris at 3:57 pm, Sep 22, 2020



DONATE



ELECTIONS

Wanted: Young People To Work The Polls This November

August 5, 2020 · 5:00 AM ET



4-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST Download



Poll workers must take extra precautions this year to protect themselves against the coronavirus. Election experts fear a massive shortage of workers at the polls in November.

John Minchillo/AP

Susan Weiss has been a poll worker in Bethesda, Md., for 16 years.

"It's really quite an experience doing it," she says. "Setting up all the equipment, putting signs up, putting arrows on the floor, etc. The camaraderie of the group that volunteers is marvelous."

But this year, with the coronavirus pandemic raging, Weiss, who's 74, decided it's just too risky to work the election in November.

"I'm a very patriotic person. I felt this is just a duty that we should have, you know? So not doing it, it makes me sad," she says. "And I feel a little selfish about it because there are people that are really putting themselves out there during this pandemic and I marvel at that, I marvel at our first responders. But should I get the virus, I'm quite concerned over my being able to survive it."

Instead, her grandson, Max Weiss, is going to take her place at the polls.

He's a law student at William & Mary and helped form the Alliance of Students at the Polls, which is building a national network of law students to serve as workers.



ANALYSIS

2020 Electoral Map Ratings: Trump Slides, Biden Advantage Expands Over 270 Votes



ELECTIONS

Fueled By Suburbs, Democrats Are Poised For Gains In Key States, Analysis Finds

"The reason we thought law students are in a good position to lead this [effort] is that we can bridge the gap to understanding regulations and

obstacles that are going to get in the way of volunteering at the polls and understand the obstacles that free and fair elections face in 2020," he says.

Weiss says putting work into something that's focused on civics — not politics — is refreshing.

"I've always had the energy to go out and campaign," he says. "But this is the nonpartisan, basic democracy-saving stuff, which is people going out and volunteering so that other people can vote."

Most poll workers are over 60

Weiss' group is just one effort to find new poll workers for the general election.

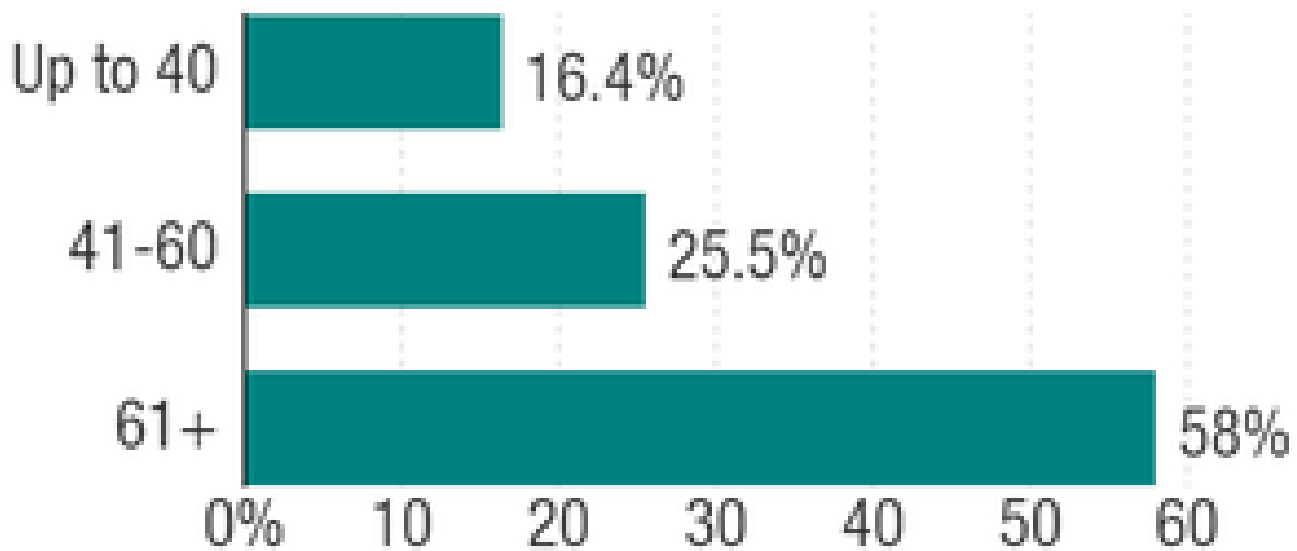
In an unusual partnership, entities including Comedy Central, the Fair Elections Center, Patagonia, Uber and Levi Strauss & Co. are recruiting poll workers.

"It really does speak to the level of concern that all of these folks who normally aren't on the same side of things see the need to come together and solve this big problem," says Scott Duncombe, who's heading a new initiative called Power the Polls.

Through digital marketing, Power the Polls aims to recruit 250,000 new poll workers on behalf of its partner organizations, most of which fall under Civic Alliance, a nonpartisan coalition of businesses. Civic Alliance is encouraging its members to provide paid time off for employees who elect to staff poll locations.

According to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 58% of poll workers in the 2018 general election were over 60, an age that is linked to a higher risk for complications with COVID-19.

Most Poll Workers In 2018 Were Over 60



Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission

A shortage of election workers plagued some early primary states, and election experts fear a massive shortage for the general election.

"We're talking about enormous numbers of poll workers who are not going to feel comfortable, and already have shown it in the primary, being in the polling places in the midst of a pandemic when they have concerns about their health," says Bob Brandon, president of the Fair Elections Center.

Brandon says even in normal times, convincing people to sign up to staff the polls can be challenging. It's usually a 12-hour-plus day, with minimal pay and a fair amount of stress. Add in all the health concerns a pandemic brings, and

it's even harder to attract new workers.

And although voting by mail is expected to increase dramatically this fall, Brandon says robust, in-person voting remains essential.

"If you have a disability that requires you to be on an accessible machine to vote, you need to be there in person," he says. "If you're in a community that has terrible mail service, which many poor communities complain of, that's an important need. Many people in the African American community have a distrust of anything different than taking a ballot and putting it into a machine, because of the history of voter suppression that they've encountered."

Brandon adds, "We can't allow the lack of poll workers to mean there'll be a lack of opportunities for people to vote in person, which will only lead to longer lines and other problems that ultimately mean fewer people vote."



Election workers wear masks and face shields and work behind plexiglass while assisting a voter during Maine's primary

elections on July 14 in Portland.

David Sharp/AP

The Fair Elections Center had been working to recruit new poll workers even before the pandemic hit, with a database designed to simplify the process of becoming a poll worker. The site, which provides its data to Power the Polls, allows users to find their jurisdiction easily and provides them with specialized information on training requirements, work hours and pay, and directs them to the jurisdiction's application.

"[Staffing the polls was] one of those things that just kind of worked," Power the Polls' Duncombe says. "When jurisdictions needed poll workers, they'd ask their local League of Women Voters and they'd get retirees. And it just kind of worked until this dang pandemic blew up the assumption that you [can] have retirees work on the election. So we've got to kind of learn this whole new way."

Maybe there's a pandemic "silver lining"

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, a Republican, has been trying to drum up interest among younger people, who are less susceptible to COVID-19's worst outcomes, and have the added benefit of being more tech-savvy.

He has a simple pitch: "Help us defend democracy. When you show up at your neighborhood polling location, somebody's going to be there behind the table to greet you, to check your ID, to hand you your ballot. That doesn't happen by magic."

The primary season saw scores of poll workers drop out for fear of contracting the virus, which led to the shutting down of poll locations in places such as

Wisconsin and long lines in Georgia.

"My heart goes out to them, but our friends in Milwaukee had a last-minute need to do a massive consolidation of polling locations just because they didn't have enough poll workers," LaRose says. "We can't have that last-minute consolidation of polling locations type of thing occur here in Ohio. If there's going to be a need to reduce the number of polling locations, we need to know about that early so that voters can be notified."

He's working with businesses to give their employees time off to serve as poll workers, encouraging attorneys to work in exchange for continuing legal education credit and even targeting 17-year-olds.

Last year, LaRose started a program where county boards of elections bring real voting machines to high schools for different kinds of elections: class presidents and homecoming queens.

"Let the students come in and out of the cafeteria and cast their ballots on real voting machines, get them registered to vote," he says. "What we found is these students walk out and say, 'Well, that was easy.' And then we tell them, 'In a few months you can vote for president of the United States, not just class president.' And they find that exciting. In many cases, we've been able to recruit quite a few poll workers."



2020 ELECTION: SECURE YOUR VOTE

Trump Floats Delaying The Election. It Would Require A Change In Law

He adds: "Maybe the silver lining of this whole pandemic experience is that we recruit a whole new generation of poll workers."

"Special opportunity"

That generation now includes Rocío Hernandez, a 24-year-old in suburban Chicago. She signed up through Power the Polls to work Illinois' primary in March.

She intends to return in November despite her worries over the coronavirus.

"There is fear in that," she admits. "But I also recognize that I'm fortunate that I have very good health. When I look at the news and I see places that have already had primaries and have had shortages and they've had to consolidate polling locations, that's the consequence of not having enough poll workers. And I don't want to see that happen in my community."

Hernandez is bilingual and says being a poll worker allows her to help make members of her community feel more welcome at the polls.

"I think about my own parents. They speak English, but sometimes they're not necessarily the most secure in their English," she says. "I think there really is something special about being able to go to the polls and talk to somebody who speaks your own language and get your questions answered in your own language. I think that's a special opportunity that younger poll workers can really bring to the table."

Susan Weiss, the longtime Bethesda poll worker, says she hopes more young people will step up to take the mantle, like her grandson.

"I am a person who has always given back," she says, "and I think Max ... knows that's how I live, so I'm proud that he gets it, and I wish more people would get it."

More Stories From NPR



ELECTIONS

Step Aside Election 2000: This Year's Election May Be The Most Litigated Yet





ELECTIONS

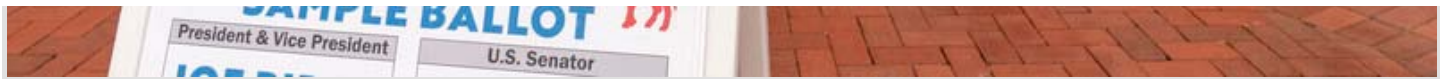
This Voting Season, What's Keeping You Up At Night?



ELECTIONS

Biden Enters Campaign's Final Stretch With Cash Advantage Over Trump





ELECTIONS

Poll: Most Young Americans Prefer Biden, But Trump Backers Are More Enthusiastic



POLITICS

Washington Politics Could Be About To Enter A 'Post-Apocalyptic' Phase



ELECTIONS

Money Tracker: How Much Trump And Biden Have Raised In The 2020 Election

Popular on NPR.org



POLITICS

With Romney's Support, GOP Likely Has Votes To Move Ahead With Ginsburg's Replacement





POLITICS

McConnell Reiterates Pledge To Vote On Trump's Supreme Court Nominee This Year



ANALYSIS

Partisan Reaction To Loss Of Ginsburg Shows How Much Else Has Been Lost



EUROPE

'A Very Serious Situation': WHO Says Coronavirus Cases Are Rising In Europe Again



INVESTIGATIONS

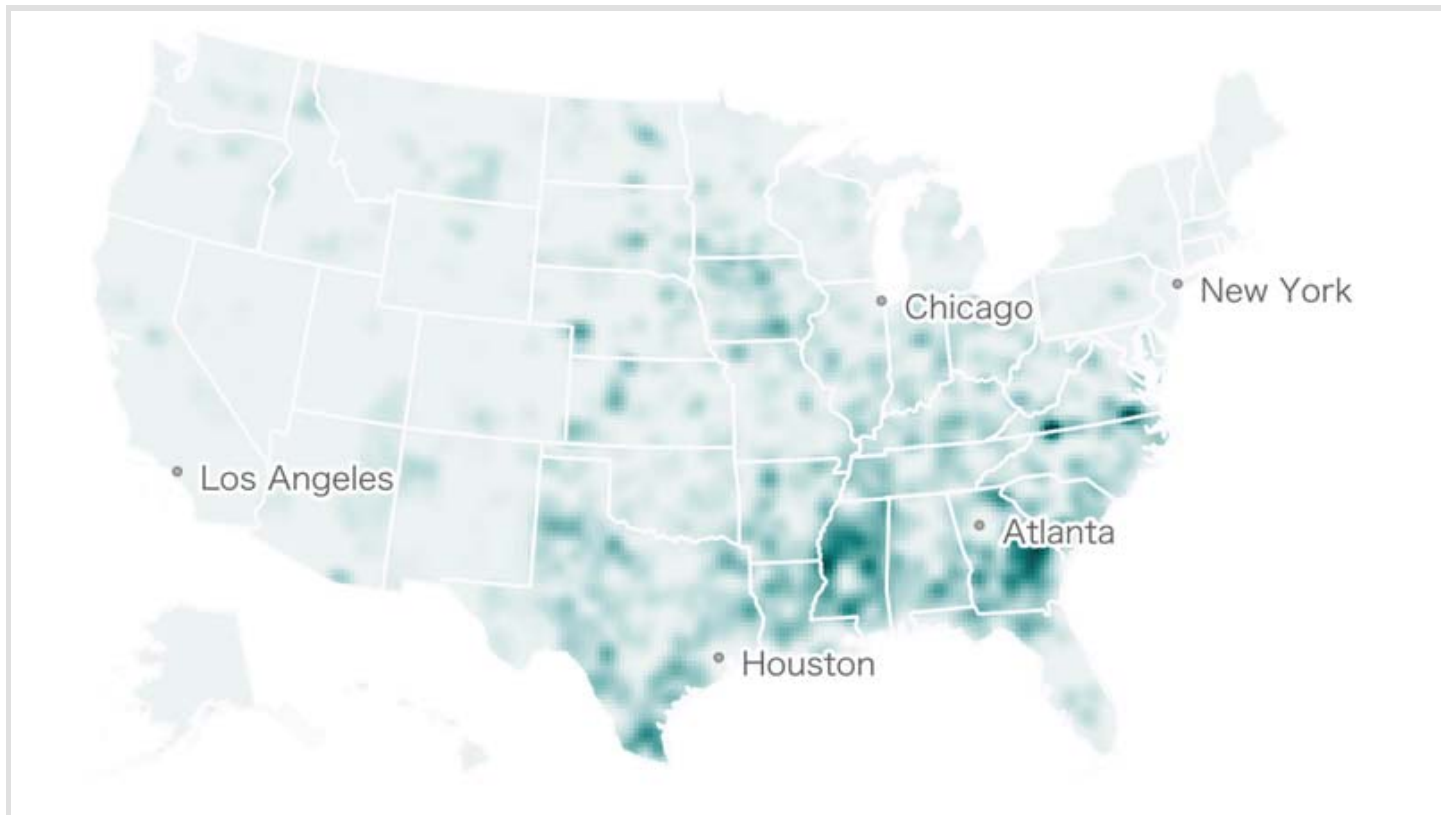
Military Confirms It Sought Information on Using 'Heat Ray' Against D.C. Protesters



HEALTH

CDC Publishes — Then Withdraws — Guidance On Aerosol Spread Of Coronavirus

NPR Editors' Picks



HEALTH

America's 200,000 COVID-19 Deaths: Small Cities And Towns Bear A Growing Share





POLITICS

'White House, Inc.' Author: Trump's Businesses Offer 'A Million Potential Conflicts'



HEALTH

With Limited COVID-19 Vaccine Doses, Who Would Get Them First?



HEALTH

CDC's Halloween Guidelines Warn Against Typical Trick-Or-Treating



NATIONAL

Louisville Mayor Declares State Of Emergency Ahead of Breonna Taylor Announcement



POP CULTURE

From 'SNL' To Workout Videos, How RBG Became A Pop Culture Icon

READ & LISTEN

Home

News

Arts & Life

Music

Podcasts

Programs

CONNECT

Newsletters

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Contact

Help

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Finances

People

Press

Public Editor

Corrections

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

Visit NPR

[terms of use](#)

[privacy](#)

[your privacy choices](#)

[text only](#)

© 2020 npr