

Contextualizing Turnover Among County-Elected Local Election Officials from 2019–2023

Summary and about CTCL and the Institute for Responsive Government

The Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL) works to connect Americans with the information they need to become and remain civically engaged, and ensure that our elections are more professional, inclusive, and secure. For over a decade, CTCL has worked with state and local election officials across the country — learning directly from election officials the successes and challenges they experience, uplifting best practices and providing training, and advocating for federal and state resources to support their work. In addition, CTCL has connected millions of Americans with candidate and officeholder data to ensure they have answers to important questions like, “What’s on my ballot?” and “Who represents me?”

The Institute for Responsive Government designs practical policy solutions for voting, election administration, and other government agencies that deliver services to people. Composed of industry-leading experts, the Institute’s team works across disciplines to build a new approach to governance that centers customer service and prioritizes efficiency, efficacy, and accessibility. Our mission is to help policymakers, including elected officials and election administrators, find solutions that make government agencies more responsive to the needs of real human beings.

Both the historical subset of local election official information in our datasets and the long-standing relationships built with election officials across the country uniquely positions CTCL and the Institute for Responsive Government to provide insight into turnover among elected local election officials (LEOs).

This report will serve as the first part of a series researching LEO turnover and retention. The goal of this first report is to more comprehensively understand the extent of LEO turnover across the U.S. through snapshots of county-elected LEOs from 2019-2023 and to contextualize why LEO turnover might be happening. Ultimately, the desired outcome of this series is to provide insights about LEO turnover that are useful in advocating for much-needed resources for local election officials.

While our findings in this initial report affirm that there are high rates of local election officials leaving office, there is more to the story. Key takeaways from this report include:

- Not all states are experiencing high levels of turnover. There are several states where the vast majority of LEOs have remained in office, including Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, and Iowa.

- When an LEO does leave office, it's not all bad news. There are incoming LEOs who bring previous government or election administration experience. There are also LEOs who are new to government and implementing fresh ideas to ensure secure and accessible elections.
- There are several national trends and state-specific factors that may be contributing to LEO turnover. In the coming months, we'll further explore factors like how receiving additional funding toward election administration, supportive associations and state election departments, and particular structures for local election administration contribute to turnover and retention.

Scope and methodology

The structure of local election officials varies significantly from state to state. There are over 12,600 local election offices in the U.S., with a vast majority of those offices — over 8,000 — administering elections at the sub-county level.

CTCL used snapshots of its [Governance Project](#) data to assess LEO turnover over time. The Governance Project is a nationwide dataset of federal, state, and local elected officials, and is sourced directly from government sources.

Since the Governance Project dataset includes *elected* officeholders, our scope for assessing LEO turnover is focused on LEOs that are both elected and administer elections at the county level; LEOs that are appointed and/or administer elections at the municipal level are outside of scope. The snapshot represents 2,151 county-elected local election officials across 28 states, out of approximately 4,500 total county-level LEOs across 43 states. Notably, turnover among these county-elected local election offices might not reflect turnover rates at the staff or appointed level, which in many cases exceeds elected leadership positions.

We opted to use three snapshots of the Governance Project data taken at the following periods:

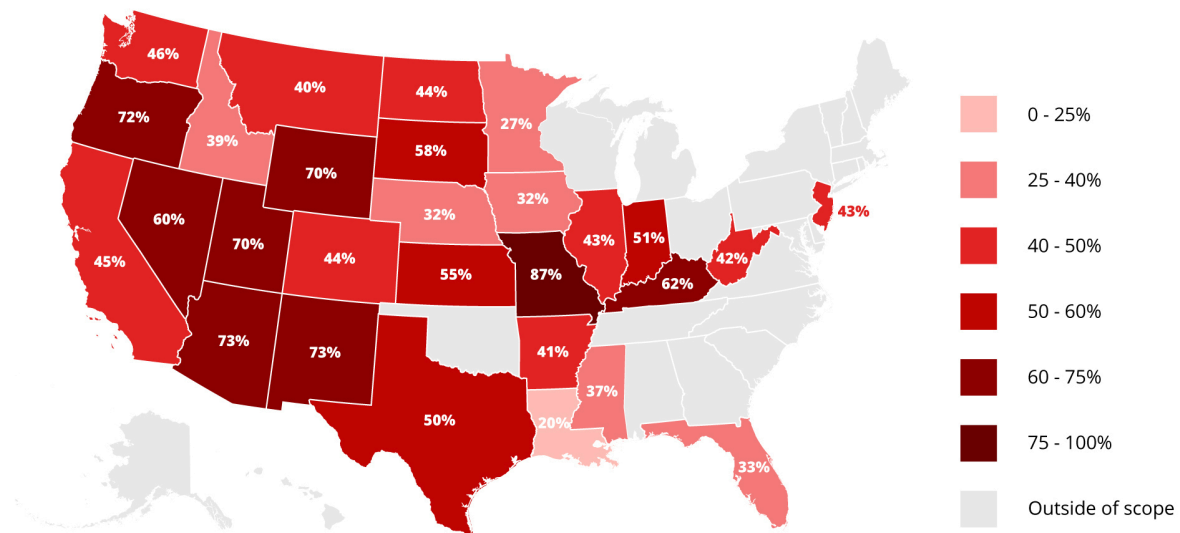
- A snapshot of county-elected LEOs taken in August 2019 to capture a baseline prior to 2020
- A snapshot of county-elected LEOs taken in August 2021 to capture turnover after the 2020 general election
- A snapshot of county-elected LEOs taken in August 2023 to capture turnover after the 2022 midterm election

The snapshots take place in August of each respective year after updating the datasets to reflect the changes in officeholders that resulted from the previous election cycle. Using these snapshots, we were able to assess whether each county-elected local election official changed or remained the same over time.

Findings

First and foremost, our findings validate insights from previous reports that there are high rates of local election officials leaving office. The [Brennan Center's survey](#) reported that 21% of LEOs either began serving after the 2020 election and/or are unlikely to continue serving through the 2024 election — **our snapshots affirm that an average of 21% county-elected LEOs began serving in 2021 and 26% began serving in 2023.**

Total % county-elected LEO turnover since 2020



Source: Center for Tech and Civic Life

We found that states with the highest level of turnover — where 60% or more of county-elected LEOs experienced turnover since 2020 — **include Missouri, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Wyoming, Wisconsin, Kentucky, and Nevada.**

- Missouri presented the highest rate of turnover with 87% of county clerks leaving office since 2020. In 2021, 57 of its 110 elected county clerks were new to the office. In 2023, 39 elected county clerks were new to the office, with 19 of those signifying repeat turnover. Eric Fey, President of Missouri's Association of County Clerks and Election Authorities, clarified that while some turnover is expected, these turnover rates are higher than normal due to the general environment county clerks are working in. Where administering an election was previously a routine affair, county clerks in Missouri are faced with increased scrutiny from their community about their work. In addition to the election

scrutiny, the non-election duties of county clerks have also become more technical and complex, and all county officials in Missouri are paid the same regardless of title. For many, it feels like a never-ending cascade of increasingly complex responsibilities amid a more scrutinous work environment, leading some county clerks to retire or seek a different role in local government.

- Our snapshot validates the turnover rates for Arizona and Nevada cited in 2023 by [Issue One](#) and the [Associated Press](#). We found that 11 out of 15 counties experienced turnover among county recorders in Arizona, and 9 out of 15 counties experienced turnover among county clerks in Nevada.
- In New Mexico, turnover was predominant in 2021 with 20 out of 33 county clerks leaving office, relative to 4 county clerks leaving office in 2023 (3 of which were repeat turnovers). Our findings on turnover among county clerks in New Mexico run slightly higher than the turnover rate reported by Issue One. Variations in turnover rates between our reports, as well as variations in the amount of election offices accounted for, can be attributed to the different timing of our respective snapshots and differences in offices within scope.

States with relatively lower levels of turnover — where one-third or less of county-elected LEOs left office since 2020 — **included Florida, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, Louisiana.**

- Wesley Wilcox, Supervisor of Elections in Marion County, Florida and past-President of the Florida Supervisors of Elections Association, offered that the structure of the local election offices, voters' trust in election administration, and support from the state association all contribute to relatively lower turnover of LEOs in the state of Florida. Specifically, the county supervisor of election office in Florida is a constitutional office that does not report to a board, and is almost singularly focused on elections rather than spread across other responsibilities. In addition, nearly [three-quarters of Florida voters trust in their county supervisor of elections](#), contributing to a less hostile work environment than in areas with less trust in election administration. Lastly, Florida's investment in election administration post-2000 and the state association providing resources and support to county supervisors of elections also contributes to relatively higher rates of retention among LEOs.
- We hope to more closely examine how different structures for local election administration, breadth of responsibilities, and working relationships with state associations shape LEO turnover and retention.

Importantly, turnover occurs at different times in different states. Some states experienced extremely low turnovers in 2021 following the 2020 election, with spikes of turnover in 2023. For example, Colorado, Arkansas, Nebraska, and Montana experienced less than 10% of turnover among their respective county-elected LEOs in 2021, and then experienced between 25% to 40% turnover in 2023. For Colorado and Arkansas, this could be attributed to their county elections taking place in 2022, and local election officials opting to leave office following those local elections in 2023.

In other states, there were higher levels of turnover in 2021 with a drop in turnover in 2023. New Jersey experienced 38% turnover among county clerks in 2021 and only 5% in 2023. Similarly, Louisiana experienced 20% turnover among their clerks of court in 2021 and zero turnover in our snapshot of 2023. This is also likely attributed to both states having county elections in 2023, **suggesting that in some states, local election officials opt to leave office after their local elections have passed.**

Factors that could be contributing to turnover

There are many factors that may be contributing to the high levels of turnover overall, and the variability in turnover rates across states. **All across the country, election officials have experienced targeted harassment and threats just for doing their jobs.** A 2023 [Brennan Center survey](#) showed that one in three local election officials experienced harassment, abuse, or threats, with one in five concerned for their physical safety. Another [survey by CivicPulse](#) indicates that levels of harassment, threats, and attacks remain at a consistently high baseline toward local officeholders, with hostile behavior being more common toward women and officeholders of color. When the Department of Justice brought together a group of 750 election officials in 2022, they found that [11% of the threats received](#) met the threshold for a federal criminal investigation.

At the same time, **local election offices are severely under-funded, even while they have been tasked with administering elections amidst rising security threats, changing election laws, and the need to update technology.** In [over one-third](#) of the 2,000 local election offices surveyed by the [Elections Infrastructure Initiative](#), officials identified urgent needs — such as aging buildings and a lack of adequate heating and cooling — that must be met to ensure the safety and security of our elections. Faced with the challenges of harassment and lack of funding, it follows that many election officials would leave the profession.

Beyond the issues that are specific to local election officials, **workers across industries have left their jobs at record rates over the years following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.** This “Great Resignation” has [hit local government particularly hard](#), with many workers leaving jobs due to the strain of the Covid-19 pandemic, retirement, or to seek higher paying jobs elsewhere. This large exodus from local government is part of a larger trend of workers leaving state and local government even before the pandemic. In 2010, the [quit rate](#) was 6.1%, compared with 9.7% in 2016 and 11.7% in 2020. These numbers are significantly lower than the rates of elected LEO turnover found in our research, but the overall shift out of local government may still be a contributing factor.

States have very different structures for local election administration, ranging from a single elected official to a multi-member board or commission. Additionally, some jurisdictions have term limits for elected LEO positions, which guarantees a certain level of turnover. We hope to

explore in the future whether particular structures are more susceptible to high rates of turnover and what the impact of that turnover might be on the communities they serve.

Finally, although turnover among elected local election officials presents challenges in terms of onboarding and institutional knowledge, it's not all bad news. In some jurisdictions, the new election official may be someone who has worked in the office for years and brings a wealth of experience and knowledge. There are numerous examples of this across the country:

- In 2022, [Christian County, Kentucky, elected Melinda Humphries](#) to the position of county clerk after she served as the county's election coordinator for 20 years.
- In a high-profile special election in 2023, [Warren County, Iowa elected Kimberly Sheets](#) to the position of county auditor after she served as the county's deputy auditor for four years.
- In [Marion County, Kansas, Deputy County Clerk Ashley Herpich](#) was appointed to county clerk earlier this year to fill the remainder of the previous county clerk's term, and brings over 10 years of experience as the county's deputy clerk.

In many instances, new LEOs have successfully navigated the challenges of administering elections. Stephen Richer, who was elected as recorder of Maricopa County, Arizona in 2020, has pursued multiple strategies for [countering false information](#) about elections. For the [2022 election](#), Maricopa County opened vote centers and mailed ballots on time and had no long lines for in-person voting. New LEOs can also bring fresh ideas and connections to their communities. Also in 2020, Gabriella Cázares-Kelly, a citizen of Tohono O'odham Nation, became the [first Native American elected to a countywide seat](#) in Pima County, Arizona when she was elected county recorder. Since then, she has agreed to [establish an early voting site](#) on the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's reservation.

Conclusion and next steps

This Super Tuesday, thousands of local election officials are stepping up to run presidential, congressional, state, and local primary elections for the first time with eyes wide open of what they are getting into. New local election officials know that they are facing threats and harassment, that their office will be under scrutiny — and yet they are choosing to help voters in their community navigate the election process and ensure our elections are secure, accessible, and accurate.

But new LEOs need the help of their peers to navigate challenging bureaucracies, need supportive associations and state election departments to provide training and guidance, and need reliable and sustainable funding to ensure that they are able to stay in their roles.

While high volumes of turnover can raise alarm bells, our team will continue to research the following:

- Exploring whether states that receive additional funding toward election administration and states with supportive associations can help retain LEOs and support new ones.
- Exploring whether particular structures for local election administration, such as term limits or single offices vs. multi-member boards, play a role in turnover and comparing states with similarly structured local election offices that are experiencing vastly different rates of turnover among local election officials.
- Comparing LEO turnover rates with that of other county-elected offices using CTCL's Governance Project data. We hope this further contextualizes LEO turnover by pointing toward what "normal" turnover rates are among other local elected offices.
- Expanding our coverage to probate judges in Alabama and municipal local election officials Michigan and Wisconsin to monitor turnover over time.

If you are interested in learning more about our data or partnering with us for future research, please reach out to data@techandcivicliflife.org or ali@responsivegoverning.org.