



Ottawa County

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Justin F. Roebuck

Testimony of Justin F. Roebuck, Clerk of Ottawa County, Michigan

To the United States Senate Committee on Rules and Administration

March 28, 2023

Chairperson Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for holding this important hearing and for providing the opportunity for state and local election officials to share their experiences, as well as the challenges and opportunities that we see on the horizon for the administration of elections across the United States.

I have served as the County Clerk in Ottawa County, Michigan for the past nine years. Ottawa County is the 7th largest of Michigan's 83 counties and as of today we have over 220,000 registered voters. During my time in office, I have observed some remarkable changes in the challenges and responsibilities of election administration at the local level.

While the number of changes have been vast over the past decade, I believe there are three main threats that have emerged specifically over the past few years that are directly affecting our nation's local election officials, and that if not addressed will have a significant impact on the future of election administration. Those changes are: heightened scrutiny leading to increased demands on our time, threats to our physical security, and the departure of experienced colleagues and staff, creating a deficiency of institutional knowledge. These threats represent a transformation in the work of election administration, and I believe they necessitate a shift in the way we think about funding our election infrastructure, particularly the need for sustained and regular funding at the federal level.

Intense Scrutiny

Elections are the lifeblood of a free people; and election administration requires examination and oversight from the public. Our elections must be public events, open to observation and healthy challenge. We must have visible checks and balances in place to correct human error, and enforceable laws on the books to ensure prosecution of intentional wrongdoing. These ideas are cornerstones of a healthy democratic republic.

In recent years, however, we have seen a new kind of scrutinization of the process. This inquisition emanates less from a vigilant and informed public, and more from intentional disinformation, proliferated at best for the profit of a few, and at worst, aimed at undermining our institutions.

Local election officials have felt the impacts of this disinformation in the countless conversations we are having across America with voters who feel that they can no longer have confidence in their elections. They have been given information from sources that they trust: political leaders, media outlets, or activists. Many of

the citizens in our communities are genuinely concerned. Some are willing to engage in dialogue with their local election officials and come to a richer understanding of how our process works. Some are angry and disillusioned with the process entirely and have chosen antagonism rather than a solution-based approach.

Whether we are having conversations with local residents or producing information for the extensive public records requests that stream in from across the country, local election officials are finding less time for the everyday work that is required to prepare for and execute our elections. In late 2022, I was fortunate to have the funding from my Board of County Commissioners for an additional staff person whose main function would be to respond to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests so that our elections team could continue their normal functions. Many of my colleagues have not been as fortunate. In many communities, additional local funding has not been made available to meet this growing need.

Security Threats

The stream of disinformation and confusion surrounding election administration has also resulted in serious threats to the security of our election operations and to the physical safety of election officials. We need investment in the physical security of election equipment as it is stored prior to use. We need investment to ensure the safety of polling places during voting hours. And in some cases, we need to ensure proper physical security of the spaces in which we work. All these challenges are relatively new in the post-2020 environment, but again, have not seen adequate recognition of, or investment in, the need.

Workforce Challenges

As we look to the future of election administration, I believe we face a fundamental shift in the nature of this work. Now more than ever, we need a professional workforce capable of taking on the new challenges and opportunities in election administration. Yet, we are seeing an exodus of institutional knowledge and experience in the field of election administration. Many veteran election officials are making the decision to retire or leave the profession. We need a new generation of public servants, committed to high ethical standards, to ensure the integrity of our elections and to bolster the public confidence that is so vital to the continuation of our system of government. We must make the public investment necessary to ensure that the field of election administration is one that attracts highly skilled professionals willing to make a career of this work.

The Need to Re-Think Funding at the Federal Level

These challenges all point to a need to reconsider how we look at federal funding for our elections. The autonomy of states and local governments to administer their own elections is a distinctive feature of the American electoral system. De-centralized elections celebrate the uniqueness of states and communities and contribute to the integrity of the process. Nonetheless, there is a vital role for the federal government to play in providing support and resources for election administration. For the future of our democratic process to thrive, election operations at the state and local level require thoughtful and consistent funding from the federal government.

Though election infrastructure was rightfully named as critical government infrastructure by the Department of Homeland Security in 2017, we have yet to see any form of sustained, regular funding at the federal level to acknowledge this designation. Periodic grant funding provided through various federal agencies has helped to support security measures and provide important modernization to state and local systems. However, a key challenge with these grant dollars is their yearly appropriation. The uncertainty of whether funds will be

available undermines preparedness, as election officials are working many months in advance to shore up needed resources and ensure readiness for our voters.

Deficiency of Government Funding Risks Special Interest Involvement in Elections

The continued absence of funding in the long term will have significant negative effects upon the infrastructure of our elections, and place their security at risk. The lack of adequate federal support has drawn private interests to step into the gap in the form of individual, foundation, and corporate grants for election administration. This intervention, however well-intentioned, has the potential to place our democratic system upon the weak footing of dependency on special interests.

I do believe there is a space for government and private interests to work collaboratively toward solutions that benefit everyone. While there are many successful examples of public-private partnerships working to foster innovation and provide resources in the public sector, I believe that using these partnerships to fund the critical infrastructure by which we choose our government can lead to a dangerous precedent of private or corporate influence, whether real or perceived.

While in some jurisdictions the use of private grants in funding election operations may be an option that does not negatively impact public trust, this is not the case in my community. Our citizens should not be forced to wonder whether the political leanings of a donor are influencing processes or affecting outcomes. America is the wealthiest and most powerful democracy in world history. We should never put the public servants who run our elections in the place of asking private donors for the resources to do what their tax dollars should already provide.

Though there are many challenges on the horizon, we are also faced with innumerable opportunities to make our elections more efficient, more secure, more responsive to voters. I am hopeful that the recent national focus on the process of election administration will propel us to action, in order to ensure a democracy worthy of passing to future generations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony to the Senate Rules Committee. I am grateful for your willingness to hear some of the challenges facing election administrators at the local level, and I look forward to following your work and the continuing discussion on these critical issues.

Respectfully Submitted,

Justin F. Roebuck
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Ottawa County, Michigan