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Administrators of Democracy: Implementing & Innovating in Election Administration

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In AY 2020-2021, I received a University of Montana small research grant (UGP) for \$4,993.45. The purpose of the funded project is to understand how election officials (e.g., county clerk, recorder, and/or election director) deliver elections in Intermountain West states. This research is significant to the field of public administration because it expands our understanding of front-line public employees. It is also significant to the emerging field of election administration research because of its focus on the Intermountain West, and rural communities. Finally, this project may prove significant insofar as the majority of election officials in the selected case states present as women, suggesting a new vein of potential research related to representative bureaucracy, gender, and democracy.

Initial study design called for in-person focus groups with election officials in Colorado, Montana, and Utah. However, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was redesigned to rely on a web-based survey of qualitative and quantitative questions. With the shift of the study to an online environment, the scope was expanded to include additional states (Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nevada, Wyoming).

The University of Montana's support was significant to this project, enabling me to hire graduate students who: 1) developed and updated a database of Intermountain West election officials; 2) tested and revised survey questions; 3) disseminated and nudged sample participation; and, 4) analyzed both open-ended and quantitative results.

Recruitment e-mails were sent to 350 local election officials to their publically-available e-mail addresses in eight states. Ninety-seven individuals participated in this study for an overall response rate of 28 percent.

This project represents a snapshot in time of election administration and administrators in the wake of the 2020 U.S. presidential election and in the midst of a global public health pandemic. The data collected from this study will be used to write exploratory articles, present at appropriate academic and professional conferences, and to share with election professionals in the region. Further, participants had the opportunity to "opt-in" to future election administration work – the first offshoot of which will begin in the form of a study of pollworker motivation this November (2021).

I am grateful for the University of Montana's investment in understanding the actions and attitudes of our front-line democracy defenders (election officials) and look forward to expanding the project's scope in the near future.