

Implementing Proposal 22-2: Qualitative Interviews with 35 Municipal Election Clerks

Executive Summary

Proposal 22-2, passed by voters in 2022, is now being implemented. Once enabling legislation has been ratified by statute, 1,603 local and county election clerks will be responsible for ensuring that the amendment is carried out across Michigan's 1,520 local election jurisdictions. From late March to late May 2023, Voters Not Politicians Education Fund interviewed more than 35 municipal election clerks serving 897,291 registered voters with the goal of learning and sharing their perspectives on the work ahead.

The interviews conducted with local election administrators revealed several key findings. Firstly, all the clerks expressed the need for additional financial support from the state to adequately fund elections in 2024, regardless of their jurisdiction's size. Many clerks highlighted uncertainty regarding their plans for early voting, with 16 out of 35 respondents still undecided and awaiting guidance. Another notable finding was that a majority of clerks have little experience in administering pre-paid postage for absentee ballot return envelopes. Regarding publicly-disclosed donations to fund elections, there was a lack of clarity among clerks. Nearly half of clerks expressed uncertainty as to whether they would accept or seek such donations, indicating a need for more guidance from state authorities in order to move forward.

Lastly, the clerks emphasized the importance of voter education over the next two years. They stressed the need for comprehensive education on the election process, the changes introduced by Proposal 22-2, and the security measures in place that ensure fair and accurate elections. They hope to see voters well-informed and empowered to participate in the electoral process.

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Acknowledgements

We express our heartfelt gratitude and utmost appreciation to our remarkable volunteers who have dedicated their time, energy, and passion to this project. Your generosity and selflessness inspire us all and remind us of the power of collective action. To each and every one of our volunteers, thank you for making a difference in the lives of others. Your dedication to civic engagement leaves a lasting legacy of compassion and hope for a future in which all political power is inherent in the people.



Qualitative Interview Methodology

Beginning in early spring 2023, Voters Not Politicians Education Fund mobilized over 100 volunteers across the state of Michigan to interview and engage with their local election clerk. All interviews in this report were conducted by at least one voter registered in the election jurisdiction that the municipal clerk serves. Interviews took place over a two-month period, and each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes.

All interviews took place between March 14th, 2023, and May 24th, 2023. Our volunteer constituents conducted interviews with the same set of 19 standardized questions to ensure a valid qualitative summary of their findings. VNPEF volunteers continue to engage and interview municipal election clerks throughout Michigan this summer. While not statistically significant, we hope the results of this survey are enlightening and instructive for groups working on implementation of Proposal 22-2.

Summarized Results

In this section, we compiled 35 individual interviews with election clerks. The following information has been collected, analyzed, and summarized to identify key takeaways, including most common responses and identified themes.

Question 1: *How many elections have you served as clerk? (34 Responses)*

- Least Experience: 2 elections
- Median Experience: 12 elections
- Most Experience: 62 elections

Question 2: *What do you enjoy most about serving in the role of election administrator for your community? (24 Responses)*

1. **Service to the community:** Many clerks expressed their dedication to serving the public and providing an essential service to the community. They find satisfaction in assisting voters and helping them exercise their right to vote.
2. **Voter turnout and participation:** In general, they highlighted the positive impact of community members coming out to participate in elections. Appreciation is expressed for good turnout and excitement, particularly from first-time registrants.
3. **Timeliness and accuracy:** Several clerks emphasized the importance of getting things done in a timely manner and ensuring correctness in the election process.

Question 3: *What is the most important thing you wish voters understood about your work and the role of the clerk? (30 Responses)*

1. **Importance of election security:** Many clerks emphasized the need for voters to understand that elections are secure and that all staff overseeing the elections are trained. They highlighted the extensive checks and balances in place to ensure fair and accurate results.
2. **Clerk's duties and responsibilities:** Several clerks mentioned the breadth of responsibilities held by the clerk, with elections being just one aspect of their job. They emphasized the coordination with state and county officials, adherence to rules and regulations, and the comprehensive testing and oversight conducted by the clerk's office.

3. **Lack of voter education and understanding:** A number of respondents expressed a desire for voters to have a better understanding of the election process. They mentioned the need for voting education in schools, dispelling misinformation about candidates and voting rules, and encouraging individuals to take ownership of their voting rights.

Question 6: *In the 2022 General Election, were you able to meet your election inspector hiring objectives? (32 Responses)*

- 91% (29 out of 32) clerks were able to meet their hiring objectives for election inspectors in the most recent even-year general election.
- 6 clerks cited difficulty in recruiting a balance of election inspectors from both major political parties.

Question 7: *Before 2023, was your municipality providing pre-paid postage for absentee ballot return envelopes? (32 Responses)*

Only 25% (8 respondents) provided pre-paid postage on absentee ballot return envelopes prior to the passage of Proposal 22-2. For the vast majority of respondents (75%), the 2023-2024 election cycle will be the first time that their offices will be implementing this voter access measure.

Question 8: *Before 2023, approximately how many voters in your jurisdiction were signed up for the permanent absentee ballot application list? (28 Responses)*

An average of 40% of registered voters (293,573 out of 734,118) are on the permanent absentee ballot application list, according to the responses of 28 election clerks.

Question 9: *Early Voting - The first election that early voting must be provided for is the February 2024 Presidential Primary. What are your plans to offer Early Voting to your constituents? (34 Responses)*

- 16 out of 34 clerks plan to run their own early voting sites in 2024
- 5 out of 34 clerks intend to opt-in to county-level consolidated plans
- 13 out of 34 clerks were unsure. Many of them noted they were waiting to evaluate their respective county clerk's plan for consolidated early voting sites before making a final decision. A few respondents cited their final decision will be determined once they understand how much funding they will receive from state appropriations.

Question 13: *Proposal 22-2 states, "A COUNTY, CITY, OR TOWNSHIP CONDUCTING AN ELECTION MAY ACCEPT AND USE PUBLICLY-DISCLOSED CHARITABLE DONATIONS AND*

IN-KIND CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONDUCT AND ADMINISTER ELECTIONS. THE COUNTY, CITY, OR TOWNSHIP SHALL RETAIN DISCRETION OVER WHETHER TO ACCEPT OR USE ANY SUCH DONATIONS OR CONTRIBUTIONS” Do you plan to utilize this method of funding supplementation for your municipality? (31 Responses)

Only 6 out of 31 clerks asserted they plan to utilize this method of funding for their jurisdiction. 13 out of 31 clerks said that they may or were undecided on the matter. 12 out of 31 clerks confidently said no.

The 13 clerks who responded “maybe” or “undecided” cited several factors:

1. It depends on the nature of the funding source (several said that they would not accept from any source that could be seen by the public as having a partisan influence.)
2. This possibility will be evaluated after final decisions on funding from the state are announced.
3. One clerk suggested that they would only accept funding from a private source if the Secretary of State approved the source as a ‘neutral’ party.

Question 14: *Giving your best estimate, how much supplemental funding (either from the State of Michigan or by publicly-disclosed donations) would be needed for your municipality to sufficiently fund all elections held in 2024?*

These are soft estimates of the anticipated new costs for administering three elections in 2024:

Over 50,000 registered voters: \$0.37 - \$3.52 per voter

15,000 - 49,999 registered voters: \$0.91 - \$6.33 per voter

Under 15,000 registered voters: \$1.90 - \$14.93 per voter

A breakdown of cost estimate examples are provided in Appendix B at the bottom of this document.

Question 16: *In your community, what information do you think voters will need to be well-informed to cast their ballot in elections held over the next two years (Early voting hours, Changes to AV Voting, etc.)? (30 Responses)*

1. Understanding the Voting Process and Options:

- Clear understanding of how elections work and the absence of corruption
- Awareness of checks and balances in the election process, such as signature verification

- Knowledge of the differences between early voting and absentee voting (AV), including where and when to vote

2. Clarification on Rules and Procedures:

- Knowledge of early voting hours, locations, and access to drop boxes
- Understanding the rules for maintaining the permanent absentee ballot list and the implications for voters with multiple addresses
- Identification of restrictions and requirements for early voting, including hours
- Clarification on procedures for spoiling ballots, especially in cases where a candidate drops out after a ballot is cast

3. Voter Education and Trust-building:

- Need for comprehensive voter education campaigns, including graphics, videos, and forms of communication
- Importance of building trust in the voting process and combating misinformation
- Utilization of various channels, such as social media, websites, neighborhood leaders, and schools, to disseminate information
- Recognition of the lack of local newspapers or media outlets, emphasizing the need for alternative sources of information

Question 17: *In recent elections, have you noticed any concerted efforts to spread disinformation to voters in your jurisdiction? If yes, please explain. (32 Responses)*

- Yes Responses: 12
- No Responses: 20

“Yes, people come to township board meetings and ask if dead people are off the voting rolls now and say I’m a traitor because we use Dominion voting equipment”

“Yes, a gentleman urged voters not to use AV ballots, to go to the polls instead because a vote via an AV ballot would not count. Several residents heard about this and called us to spoil their AV ballots. During the recount of 2022 election, it was clear that the members of the Michigan Election Integrity Force did not understand the election process, and tried to claim fraud where there was none. At the Federal level, politicians and lawyers continue to falsely claim that 2020 was a fraudulent election, without evidence. This is the biggest source of disinformation and causes local voters to lose faith in the electoral process.”

“One significant instance of local social media disinformation when additional drop boxes were installed in 2020.”

“During the recount we were accused of moving ballots back-and-forth illegally—we were just returning them to my office from where the count was done. I was accused of a felony by these

people for about three months. Finally I had to threaten legal action, and that stopped the attacks. There were also FOIA requests for EMS information which could have threatened the security of our elections."

Question 18: *In the past two years, have you or anyone employed to administer elections in your jurisdiction dealt with threats, intimidation, or harassment directly related to your work? (33 Responses)*

- Yes Responses: 12
- No Responses: 21

Here a few examples of descriptions given by clerks that responded yes...

"People wearing handguns have shown up while votes are being cast; one person loitered on the periphery inside the voting premises but did not display any credentials."

"Received a death threat and a threat of sexual violence"

"Of course. There are groups that were videotaping into the clerks offices around the election to intimidate people"

"General harassment for sure."

"Yes, harassment about drop boxes. Also, someone initially refused to remove a sign which was too close to the polling place."

Question 19: *In your opinion, how can community members like us help you and your office over the next two years to successfully implement Proposal 22-2? (29 Responses)*

1. Voter Education and Information Dissemination:

- Spreading awareness about new election rules and processes to the public
- Sharing correct information on social media and other platforms
- Assisting in educating voters through community sessions, schools, and public events
- Advocating for voter education and combating misinformation, particularly online

2. Recruitment of Volunteers and Election Workers:

- Promoting the need for more volunteers to help with elections
- Encouraging community members to become certified election workers or serve as precinct delegates
- Assisting in voter registration drives and early voting initiatives

3. Legislative Advocacy and Funding Support:

- Pressuring the legislature to enact enabling legislation that provides sustainable and flexible regulations
- Lobbying for funding to support implementation costs, such as mailings and additional staffing
- Addressing issues of reimbursement to clerks' offices for past election expenses
- Communicating with legislators to emphasize the importance of timely legislation and funding

Conclusions

- **Local election administrators need financial support from the state; now more than ever:** Whether it was the rural township of Presque Isle (\$5,000) or large cities like Troy (\$150,000) every single clerk we interviewed indicated that they need additional funding to sufficiently fund all elections held in 2024.
- **Early voting plans are still ‘up in the air’ for many clerks:** A significant portion (13 out of 28) of election clerks surveyed are undecided on how they will provide early voting for the voters in their jurisdiction. Many are awaiting further guidance from the legislature, Secretary of State, and the County Clerk.
- **Most clerks have little experience administering pre-paid postage:** Few clerks (27% of those interviewed) have previous experience in administering pre-paid postage for AV ballot return envelopes.
- **Publicly-disclosed donations to fund elections may be underutilized:** The most common response (13 out of 28 were maybe/undecided) on whether they will accept or seek donations to supplement funding for administering elections indicates a strong desire for more guidance from state authorities.
- **Ample voter education is needed over the next two years:** Clerks want voters to receive more education on the overall election process and the new changes to voting access under Proposal 22-2. Furthermore, they want to see voters educated so they can better understand the security measures in place, and existing processes that ensure fair and accurate elections.

Appendix A: Municipal Election Clerk Interview Log

Interview Date	County	Jurisdiction	Registered Voters
March 14, 2023	Presque Isle	Presque Isle Township	1,804
March 20, 2023	Mecosta	Big Rapids Township	3,182
March 22, 2023	Monroe	Monroe City	17,525
March 23, 2023	Jackson	Henrietta Township	4,010
March 29, 2023	Houghton	County Clerk	20,815
March 29, 2023	Berrien	New Buffalo City	1,808
April 3, 2023	Oakland	Huntington Woods City	5,657
April 3, 2023	Oakland	Independence Township	30,021
April 3, 2023	Kent	Caledonia Township	12,638
April 4, 2023	Washtenaw	Ypsilanti City	17,430
April 4, 2023	Oakland	Farmington City	7,899
April 5, 2023	Cass	Porter Township	3,367
April 6, 2023	Ingham	Meridian Township	33,229
April 10, 2023	Oakland	Bloomfield Township	4,089
April 11, 2023	Kalamazoo	Portage City	40,730
April 13, 2023	Oakland	Farmington Hills	65,883
April 14, 2023	Washtenaw	Ypsilanti Township	46,741
April 16, 2023	Saginaw	Fremont Township	1,686
April 17, 2023	Wayne	Canton Township	77,512
April 18, 2023	St. Clair	Port Huron City	23,700
April 24, 2023	Oakland	Troy City	66,171
April 26, 2023	Kalamazoo	Kalamazoo City	56,118
April 27, 2023	Oakland	Clawson City	9,835

Appendix A: Municipal Election Clerk Interview Log

Interview Date	County	Jurisdiction	Registered Voters
April 28, 2023	Macomb	Macomb Township	72,620
May 1, 2023	Macomb	St. Clair Shores City	51,130
May 1, 2023	Midland	Midland City	35,179
May 1, 2023	Oakland	Highland Township	16,887
May 1, 2023	Ionia	Odessa Township	3,079
May 3, 2023	Lapeer	Lapeer City	6,655
May 9, 2023	Kalkaska	Garfield Township	897
May 10, 2023	Wayne	Inkster City	21,931
May 11, 2023	Oakland	Bloomfield Hills City	38,552
May 17, 2023	Washtenaw	Scio Township	15,292
May 19, 2023	Genesee	Flint City	75,719
May 24, 2023	Kalamazoo	Schoolcraft Township	7,500
		Total Voters	897,291

Appendix B: Cost Estimate Breakdown Table

Jurisdiction	Number of Registered Voters	Estimation & Explanation (summarized by interviewer)	Cost per voter
Canton Township	77,512	Public education and added training = \$30,000 Salaries & staffing = \$136,000 New voting equipment = \$10,000 Total = \$220,000	\$3.52
Troy City	66,171	New voting equipment and additional staffing Total = \$100,000 - \$200,000	\$1.51 - \$3.02
Kalamazoo City	56,118	New voting equipment and additional staffing Total = \$20,000	\$0.37
Portage City	40,730	Approximately \$45,000 per even-year election cycle	\$0.91
Port Huron City	23,700	\$150,000 for 2024 (\$50,000 per election)	\$6.33
Ypsilanti City	17,430	Would like to get (at least) an additional \$10K to purchase one more tabulator (\$5K) + an ADA machine (\$5K)	\$1.74
Farmington City	7,899	The supplemental cost would be about \$5,000 per election. Total = \$15,000	\$1.90
Bloomfield Township	4,089	\$20,000 Drop Box \$10,000/election for early voting election inspectors * 3 2024 elections = \$30,000. Total -- \$50,000.	\$12.23
New Buffalo City	1,808	Tabulator & VAT = \$11,000 Staff for early voting = \$12,000 Educational expenses - \$5,000 Total = \$27,000	\$14.93