



Q&A: Strengthening Democracy Through Research and Collaboration

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On September 25th, [Commissioner Donald Palmer](#) from the [United States Election Assistance Commission](#) (EAC) joined SSN member [Thessalia Merivaki](#) for a Q&A focused on how research can inform and enhance election practice and discuss best approaches for researchers looking to connect with election officials and civic partners.

Dr. Thessalia (Lia) Merivaki is an Associate Teaching Professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy and Associate Research Professor at the Massive Data Institute at Georgetown University. Her research expertise is on election information ecosystems and trust-building communication campaigns from election officials and democracy stakeholders. She was also part of our [SSN Election Protection & Enhancement Program](#).

Commissioner Donald Palmer serves on the EAC after being nominated and approved by unanimous consent in 2019. He served as the Chairman of the Commission in 2021. Before the EAC, he served as a Bipartisan Policy Center Fellow, advancing the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration. Mr. Palmer is a former Secretary of the Virginia State Board of Elections and served as the Commonwealth's Chief Election Official from 2011 to 2014. During that time, Palmer implemented online voter registration and established Virginia as a founding member of the Election Registration Information Center (ERIC), a group of states working together to maintain the accuracy of voter registration rolls.

Here are some highlights from their conversation:

How the EAC was founded, and their mission:

Commissioner Palmer: "Our agency came out of the [Help America Vote Act](#), which was passed a few years after the 2000 election.

There were issues with voting accuracy with the voting systems. There were issues with provisional ballots. Obviously there was a lot of litigation after that election. But this is what created the Help America Vote Act and the EAC.

We receive input not only from election officials, but we have experts from around the community and around the country that can bring a non-election official perspective and advice.

So there are many opportunities to talk about these issues. And we also have the ability to solicit surveys, information through surveys from them, for different issues. For example, we did a survey on USPS performance. We wanted to make sure we had the facts before we went to talk to them about some of the issues we were seeing.

One of the issues we distribute are [HAVA security grants](#) that come from the federal level. And we actually audit these materials. We ask for information on how they're spending the money. We use this to try to tell a story to Congress about how the states and territories and localities are using the money that are provided by the federal government to make the case that some great things are happening, some great innovations, some great security features."

On the Clearinghouse Awards or "Clearies":

Commissioner Palmer: "We collect and analyze best practices in election administration and we try to highlight those in a fun way with our [Clearinghouse Rewards](#).

But the real goal of it is to allow election officials and other stakeholders like researchers and academics, to get a sense of what are some of the best practices out there and allow that peer-to-peer communication. For example, if there's an issue with provisional ballots, how are you handling it in this state?

Election officials from across the country, as part of our network, can communicate [issues they're having]. So you can imagine the large number of issues that may occur in an election cycle. We identify [their] best practices and then do reports comparing and contrasting how different states are handling the issue at hand."

On the EAC working with academics:

Commissioner Palmer: "We're more than willing to reach out and work with academics. We know it's all about relationships and communicating effectively with each other. We want to be responsive to your needs. When I was at the state level, if an academic or university wanted information, we would try to create a page where the data could be easily downloaded for you to use--let's say it's early voting or whatever statistics that are out there that we can provide.

We're more than open to work with you. We have a research team, a comms team, and obviously our Clearinghouse. Together, if we can work together or we can provide the information that you're looking for, that points you in the right direction."

Dr. Lia Merivaki's election-focused research:

Dr. Merivaki: “My core research interests lie in understanding how policy design, election administration, and the voter experience interact and shape one another from a voter access perspective, an election integrity perspective, and an administrative burden perspective.

Driven by these themes. I have devoted most of my research on understanding voter registration, policy design, and administration of voter registration, particularly focusing on processes that are understudied and for which data are not consistently available and very difficult to obtain. And some of this data has been found through the [EAVS survey](#), and I'm very grateful for that.”

On building voter confidence in election integrity:

Dr. Merivaki: “A common thread in this research, aside from the institutional design and administrative practice, is the role of voter education in building informed and resilient voters.

In my research I argue that healthy information ecosystems are centered around local election officials who are interacting with voters on a daily basis. But [they are] severely resource constrained, and currently are under severe stress from threats and intimidation and harassment. An important measure of a healthy ecosystem, I argue, is voter confidence in election integrity.

So a lot of the work that I do revolves around testing whether communication efforts from election officials and other stakeholders help build voter confidence in election integrity. Most of this research relies on collaborations with election officials and civic partners who are on the front lines of elections.

These partnerships are built on a relationship and a relationship of trust. They are not transactional. They are not profitable in the monetary sense. They take time, they require good faith, and they should be.”

The value of collaboration for making policy more accessible:

Dr. Merivaki: “Policy can be vague and challenging to follow. It can be very dense. And it can also have severe interpretation issues both for policymakers, for administrators, and for academics. So [a major value of] collaboration with the stakeholders is it can provide a lot of nuance, a lot of context. It can clarify and it can help improve the research process because if big concepts are not clarified it is very difficult and problematic to measure them.”

How to best deliver research in a way that it can be used and not get lost in stacks of information:

Commissioner Palmer: “Research at the state level could be very helpful because legislators can use that to form the basis of their legislation that they wish to pass. They can then solicit testimony to talk about the issue and how it may be impacting that state. I think, to a certain extent, it's also true at the federal level.

We have had academics testify on different issues and we often rely on academics, for example, to do research and to maybe make conclusions that we can't necessarily make. [For the [MOVE Act](#)], the EAVs survey was used to identify the fact that there was a remarkable difference in participation between overseas and military voters compared to domestic US voters. We've also done research on the difference between voters with disabilities and the voters without disabilities. And so that provides clear evidence that there may be a need for policy tweaking."

Dr. Merivaki: "In my experience, it really depends on what audience you're trying to convince, and sometimes data is not welcome to tell that story. And the reason why I mention that is that working in Mississippi, the paper-based registration is very problematic.

Mississippi is one of the few states that doesn't have online voter registration and is very resistant in adopting it. And my experience with 2022 and my students was writing an op-ed for local media rather than national media. [We illustrated] how and why online voting would resolve a lot of the problems for voters broadly and why, for election officers, is optimal.

That was more powerful than sharing a report about line registration adoption across the states. So it really depends on the context, if you want to go state by state."

Support for or against voting on Sunday

Commissioner Palmer: "In some jurisdictions there's a lot of support for it, [often] larger jurisdictions. I was just talking to a small county here in North Carolina and they don't have Sunday voting, while other counties do. And it really has a lot to do with resources and preparation for voting.

The rest of the week, they're literally voting 17 days straight, 12 to 14 hour days. And so a lot of them need or would hope they have at least one day off. So that county made the decision not to have votes on Sunday. So it's a complicated decision."

Dr. Merivaki: "Dan Smith at the University of Florida did a cool research project that investigated when in 2011, Florida reduced the number of early voting days and Sunday was removed. And the research was about who benefited from Sunday voting. The research showed that Black voters were less likely to participate because that was a day where they were organizing as a community to go and vote.

So there is some research that shows that it is beneficial for some voters. But I, I echo Commissioner Palmer's comment that it's also an important question to ask how that affects election officials, especially where they have to do early voting for many days, and then they have to prepare for election day voting."