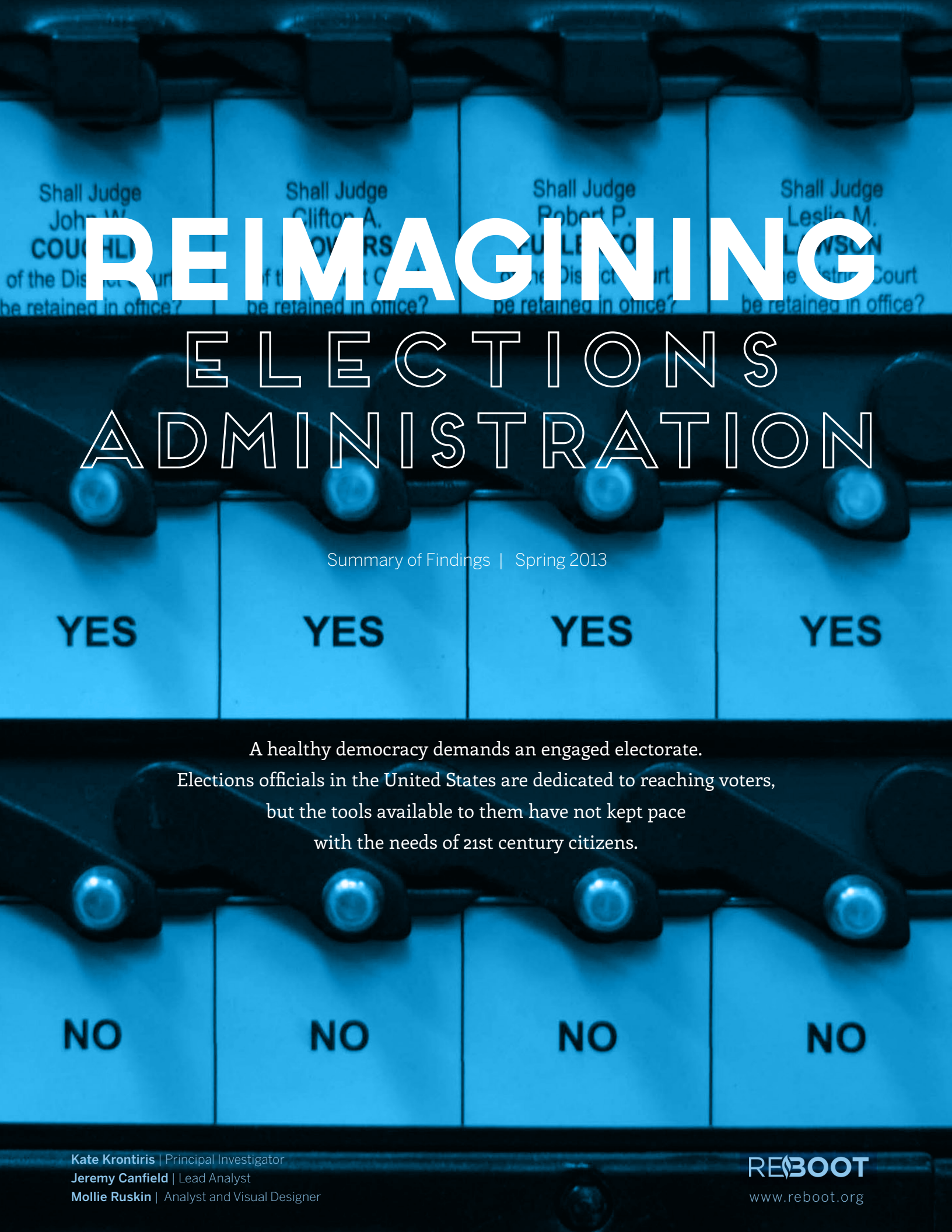

REIMAGINING ELECTIONS ADMINISTRATION

Summary of Findings | Spring 2013

A healthy democracy demands an engaged electorate.
Elections officials in the United States are dedicated to reaching voters,
but the tools available to them have not kept pace
with the needs of 21st century citizens.

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REBOOT
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The MECHANICS of American democracy are due for a modernization.

Finding out how to vote, when to vote, and where to vote is too often a test of jumping through bureaucratic hoops, for both first-time voters and those who have changed residency. On Election Day, long lines, registration obstacles, and machine failures further plague the American voting experience. When voting becomes problematic and frustrating, political participation suffers.

Federal government initiatives, such as the Presidential Commission on Election Administration and the Voter Registration Modernization Act of 2013, are seeking to address these issues and others. But for all the talk about what is (and is not) happening in Washington, the reality is that elections administration in the United States is an entirely local affair.

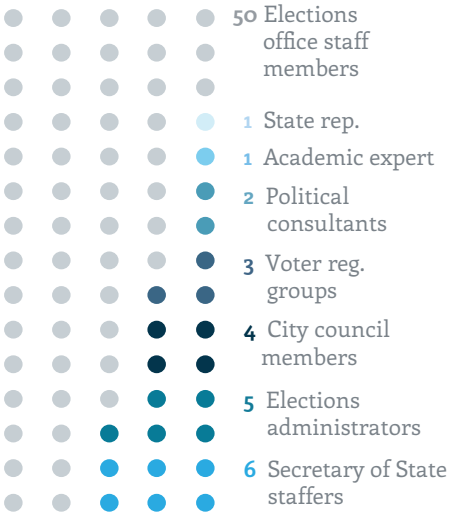
Each of the more than 10,000 election jurisdictions in the United States has its own unique systems and processes that define the voting experience locally. Administrators must coordinate with state agencies and comply with federal guidelines. Ultimately, however, elections are organized, implemented, and assessed according to local regulations. They are locally funded and deeply reflective of local political history.

Reimagining elections administration in the United States must begin with an understanding of how elections operate at the most local levels.

Working in collaboration with TurboVote, Reboot set out to explore elections administration across the country.

TurboVote is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization established to provide a more intuitive interface between voters and election offices, irrespective of jurisdiction. TurboVote's one-stop online service helped almost 200,000 people register to vote and stay informed during the 2012 election cycle.

Keen to grow its impact, TurboVote is seeking to integrate its technology directly into the government offices that administer elections.



RESPONDENTS

So, we asked the question:

What are the human motivations, technological systems, and institutional landscapes that define local elections administration?

To answer this question, we launched a six-city design research investigation into a diverse subset of election jurisdictions across the United States, which included Jefferson County, KY; Boone County, MO; Brattleboro, VT; Travis County, TX; Martin County, FL; and Denver, CO. We visited jurisdictions organized by county and others by township, some populous and others less so.

We visited places where the tax assessor's office registers voters and others where an elected supervisor of elections oversees the entire process. Each jurisdiction had different laws about electronic data sharing and electronic signatures. One was even in the midst of legislative changes that will largely rewire the administrative backend of voting.

We watched elections officials register new voters and process absentee ballots. We asked them to demonstrate their technology and explain how they procured it. We visited warehouses where elections equipment and voter records are kept. We explored the political landscape of election reform issues, mapping the formal and informal relationships that define policy, compliance, funding, and accountability.

PEOPLE + CULTURE

Many election officials are dedicated public servants foremost motivated by a desire to engage voters.

OFFICE CULTURE

The election offices we visited tended to be staffed by officials with 10 to 20 years of elections administration experience and a personal or family history in local government. The longevity of many officials' tenures contributes to office cultures marked by predictability and familiarity that encourage loyalty. Given the difficulty of hiring in government, leadership frequently invests in staff development, which also serves to strengthen office bonds.

The regular intensity of election periods further reinforces staff ties, giving many teams the feel of a family. The officials we spoke with expressed tremendous satisfaction with their professional lives, even though most did not set out to run elections.

MOTIVATIONS + FEARS

Many of the election officials we interviewed spoke of a responsibility to serve the voters in their jurisdictions; more broadly, they view their mission as helping to grow the ranks of active voters and delivering election services aimed at meeting the needs of their voters. Most expressed a strong desire to excel at their work, stemming both from the motivation to establish prestige and credibility among their peers and from the fear of public scrutiny for poor performance. Officials frequently cited "love for democracy" as an additional motivating factor in their work.

ADMINISTRATIVE APPROACH

In each election office we found distinct work styles, from an explicit bipartisan focus in Jefferson County, Kentucky to the use of business analysis in Travis County, Texas. We observed a heavy focus on evidence-based decision making for process improvements. We also noticed that election officials often embrace existing legal ambiguities to best serve the voter. Where the law is not black- and-white, the officials we spoke with tried to identify the best outcome for the voter in the gray space.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

According to the officials we interviewed, nothing influences election administration more than the experience of Election Day. Given the single-day nature of most elections, officials face tremendous public pressure to ensure everything goes smoothly. High expectations produce emotionally intense experiences, which guide much decision making about future elections.

Personal relationships matter as well. Relationships with budget decision makers in the jurisdiction, in the absence of direct budgetary control, are particularly influential, as are local election officials relationships with the state government. The culture and history of each jurisdiction is also important. In Brattleboro, Vermont, for example, residents are proud of their town meetings and structure their elections around this aspect of their democracy.

TECHNOLOGY

SOFTWARE

In each of the election offices we visited, the single consistency in software use is customization. Off-the-shelf software rarely provides the level of flexibility required for local elections administration, as every change in the law could require updates. Off-the-shelf software is also less frequently used because vendor fees for trainings and new features present ongoing costs that eat into election office budgets.

TECH TALENT

The election offices we visited nearly universally seek to hire or cultivate their own tech talent. Many of the in-house developers we spoke to do not consider themselves "techies"—they are rarely connected to local tech communities and do not seek out the latest innovations—which is reflected in the systems they develop. Older programming languages like COBOL and VB are much more prominent than newer frameworks, such as Ruby on Rails or Python / Django. Microsoft Access databases are also a common feature, used for a wide variety of functions across offices. Here, stability and reliability are king.

DATA INTEGRATION

Federal law requires that local jurisdictions integrate their voter rolls with the state systems. "Online" election offices log into the state system directly. "Offline" election offices do not use the state system directly, but instead maintain a local system and import and export changes. This is an often inefficient process that requires multiple checks, paper backups and data re-entry.

Federal law also requires that state motor vehicle departments and certain pubic assistence agencies offer their customers the option to register to vote. Often, these data do not integrate at a machine-to-machine level with local election offices, requiring election officials to re-enter the data into their local systems. These data also frequently have errors, which exacerbate the process inefficiencies, as election officials must correct the mistakes before re-entering.

Use of third-party services to integrate data does not occur and is also viewed with considerable skepticism. While much of the voter roll is public, the election officials we interviewed expressed a consistent fear of releasing privileged voter information, such as social security numbers.

Election office technology is often custom built, with an emphasis on stability and reliability (even at the expense of efficiency).

INSTITUTIONS

Election offices are embedded in a complex network of federal, state, and local institutional actors that affect their processes.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

The US Department of Justice enforces compliance with federal elections and information-sharing laws. Sometimes, pressure from the Department of Justice results in rushed and imperfect technical systems. In our research, for example, we found some states using flawed technology to maintain the voter roll in ongoing efforts to comply with federal standards.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Secretaries of State provides local elections officials with advice, resources, and funding. In some instances, they collaborate on policy advocacy.

Since Secretaries of State usually do not have direct authority over counties, state-level changes are not implemented universally at the county level. What is good for some counties may not be good for others; Secretaries of State serve as the brokers of these trade-offs and as liaisons to the federal actors that fund and regulate elections .

STATE LEGISLATURES

State legislatures create state elections law, which election officials must abide by and implement. Most elections clerks advocate for elections policy at the state level, to ensure that the laws reflect their own experiences and needs. In many cases, we found clerks (and Secretaries of State) who were frustrated with their state legislatures and much more inclined to innovate than these policy making bodies.

STATE CLERKS ASSOCIATION

The clerks association in each state advocates for elections policy and In some instances, clerks are closely aligned with and respected by their clerks association; in other cases, less so, especially if they have political disagreements.

The associations also help election office clerks provide technical support to each other.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BODIES

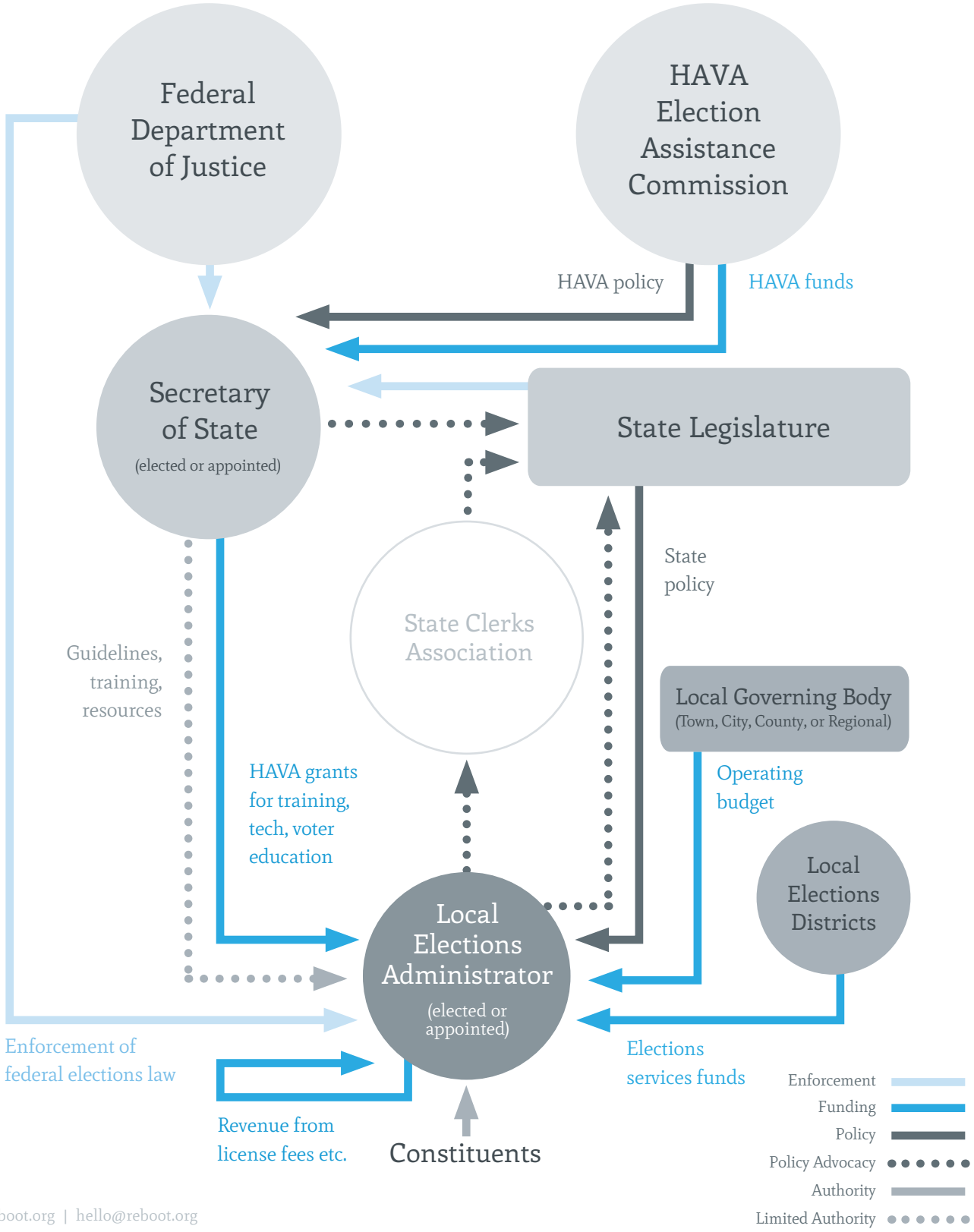
The local government authority under which an election office is housed often approves and provides funding for some portion of the office's operating budget. Where relevant, the election office may advocate on its own behalf to these authorities for budget increases and procedural approvals. Local operating budgets are supplemented by federal funding and local license and service fees.

CONSTITUENTS

When elected to office, an election clerk is really only accountable to his or her constituents. When appointed, clerks are more directly accountable to the body that has appointed them, state or local. These flows of accountability can impact a clerk's ability or willingness to make large-scale changes to process.

Institutional Relationships Influencing Election Administators

Our research unearthed the relationships that affect local election offices. This map is a generalized illustration, representing the complex networks surrounding the administration of elections at the local level. As our research was focused at county/town level elections administration, this map does not reflect all of the relationship of State and Federal entities. Dynamics, as well as titles and responsibilities, may differ from place to place.



Our research revealed a great deal about the capacities and constraints of local elections administration, as well as the opportunities for improvements.

Many of the election offices we visited are staffed with dedicated public servants who have displayed great entrepreneurship and creativity in reaching their voters. They have also tested and refined their ideas over multiple election cycles. As one election official from Travis County, Texas told us, "Each election is an opportunity to test something new."

But these innovations often occur in isolation, preventing good ideas from spreading. Our goal is to identify, popularize, and remix these existing solutions for greater uptake across the country.

Using these research findings, Reboot is supporting TurboVote to develop product prototypes for testing in a handful of jurisdictions later in 2013.

Starting in 2014, TurboVote plans to focus more narrowly on developing a suite of tools that will meet election officials' needs, which can then be scaled throughout 2015 to provide voters a radically improved experience during the presidential elections in 2016.

This is our contribution to modernizing the mechanics of American democracy.

REBOOT

Reboot is a social enterprise working to improve governance and development worldwide. We design and implement systems that help organizations become more responsive to the communities they serve. We like to think of this as working toward a 21st century social contract. From public financial management in Nigeria and media development in Pakistan, to civic engagement in the United States and beyond, our work allows citizens to make their voices heard and live better lives.

TurboVote

TurboVote is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit that wants every American to vote in every election. We make voter registration and voting by mail as easy as renting a DVD from Netflix. Anyone can sign up at turbovote.org and we help them stay registered and voting in all of their elections, from school board to presidential, for the rest of their life.