



Election workers across the country have been quitting due to the stress of dealing with political harassment. Photo credit: © Steve Schaefer/TNS via ZUMA Press Wire

ELECTIONS

Scrutineers Founder Emily Levy on Safeguarding Our Democracy

JONATHAN D. SIMON, EMILY LEVY 11/08/22

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Emily Levy is a veteran advocate for election transparency and founder of the organization Scrutineers. She was kind enough to respond to my questions regarding her work and views of our elections and democracy. This is Part 2 in our three-part series, “Defenders of Democracy.”

Jonathan Simon: It’s no secret our democracy and its elections are in trouble. Do you see one specific danger or combination of dangers that stands out?

Emily Levy: Several things stand out. One is that people whose goal is ending democracy are trying to gain control of our elections. Election deniers are running for office all over the country. They speak about “election integrity,” but they’re seeking power, not integrity. The possibility that these people could become election officials is especially dangerous when coupled with *Moore v. Harper*, the case the US Supreme Court will hear this term that could allow state legislatures to overrule election results.

With stakes this high, I’m concerned that the dirty tricks will be worse than ever. In the past we’ve seen a combination of strategies to manipulate our elections, including making it as hard as possible for some people to vote, and I suspect that’s what we’ll see again this year.

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Jonathan: We've both been working to protect our elections for a couple of decades. Do you see the situation now as markedly different from what we faced in, say, 2004 — and if so, in what way(s)?

Emily: Yes. In addition to what I've already said, the landscape is different because there are a lot more people talking about the question of whether or not our elections can be trusted.

I wish I could say that's a good thing. But since the 2020 election we're seeing people mix bona fide information about the vulnerabilities of our election systems with lies and exaggerations. That muddies the picture to the extent that it's really hard for anyone to see the situation clearly.

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For years, our warnings about security problems with our voting systems were ignored. Gandhi said, "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, then you win." By that prescription, we're queued up to win the struggle. I wish I were that hopeful.

Another difference is that there are new laws all around the country designed to keep people from voting, especially people of color and young people. For example, in Georgia, as a result of the new voter-suppression law, tens of thousands of voters' registrations have been [challenged](#).

Jonathan: You founded Scrutineers in January 2020. Can you say what your goals were and whether they've changed at all in the time since?

Emily: At the time I founded Scrutineers, the Mueller report on Russia's interference in the 2016 election had made many more people interested in issues of election security. But few had any idea that there were *actions* they could take to make their local elections more secure. There was nowhere for people to go to learn the basics about the issue. I wanted to create a resource where people could learn things like what the different types of voting systems were, their strengths and vulnerabilities, and what strategies and tactics for election protection were available.

I also saw that the voting rights movement as a whole was focused on making sure people get to *cast* their votes, which is hugely important. Yet there wasn't the needed attention to what happens to those votes *after* they're cast. Meanwhile, there were tiny organizations around the country that had developed ways to make our "black box" voting systems somewhat more transparent, but those groups didn't have the reach to implement their tactics around the country.

I wanted to find a way to bring those two approaches together, so we'd have a voting rights movement that ensured both that people can vote *and* that those votes are counted fairly and accurately.

Our goals haven't changed, but the ways we've approached them have evolved. I started Scrutineers because I saw some gaps that needed to be filled. With each election cycle, we look at what the current gaps are that we might be able to help fill.

For example, it looked to me as if this year there would need to be significantly increased attention to what happens in election offices as votes are being processed and counted, given all the accusations of malfeasance that happened after the 2020 election. So our biggest project this year has been to train people to observe the processing and counting of votes, and encourage them to be observers at their local vote counting centers. While other groups have observers on Election Day, we're focused on what happens after the voting ends. In fact, it's even called the **AFTER Project**: Act For Trusted Election Results.

Another thing that's different is that we now have to focus on supporting election workers to defend against false accusations. The observing we're training people to do focuses on that even more than on the possibility that the election results could be manipulated.

Jonathan: What do you think Scrutineers has accomplished? What hurdles and frustrations have you encountered? Have you gotten any traction with the bigger organizations, like Common Cause or Public Citizen or the NAACP? If not, to what do you attribute their lack of engagement?

Emily: As with any organization working to solve huge problems, it's hard to pinpoint accomplishments. I can identify things we've done, like growing from zero to over 1,000 members in less than three years, or writing individually to thousands of local election officials to bring election security issues to their attention, or getting one of our suggested amendments into the Freedom to Vote Act.

While I'm proud of those things and more, I don't think they'll really feel like accomplishments until we have transparent elections we all can trust.

One other specific accomplishment I'll mention is that we've expanded the ranks of the election transparency movement. There are people who've joined Scrutineers with little knowledge of the issues who are now taking leadership. That's exciting to me. I want to see much more of this, and especially to mentor young people and people of color.

I've worked hard this year to build relationships with staff and leadership in organizations like those you've mentioned. One day this summer, my mother asked if I'd seen the newsletter she'd received in the mail from one of those large national organizations. "They mentioned Scrutineers." I hadn't seen it. They had written that they'd be encouraging people to attend our training, "How to Help Stop Election Sabotage." That was exciting to me. And yet, to date, despite my following up numerous times, it hasn't happened. There's still time!

We've presented our training — which is about observing the vote counting processes — in concert with a few other organizations this year: the Future Coalition, Arab American Institute, Democracy Initiative, and Third Act. We have a wonderful partnership with Trek The Vote, which is mobilizing the *Star Trek* fan base to help protect the election.

We've had interest from Common Cause, NAACP, League of Women Voters, and other groups, but those alliances haven't quite materialized. I think there are a number of reasons for this. One is that everyone is trying to do more than they can possibly do. Organizations are underfunded and understaffed. They also may have restricted funding that prevents them from being agile about what projects they undertake.

Another thing is that, even though I've been doing this work for nearly 20 years, Scrutineers is new and they don't know us well yet. For all my frustration about that, though, I've noticed an increased understanding among staff at these organizations that election transparency and security work needs to be part of the election protection picture.

Jonathan: Beyond training observers, what, if anything, is Scrutineers planning to do for November? How is it incorporating technology? What are you encouraging concerned citizens to do? Does it depend where they live?

In addition to observing the processing and counting of votes, we're encouraging folks to take video of election results posted outside polling places on election night, using a mobile app called Actual Vote. Actual Vote was developed by Democracy Counts, one of our nine member organizations. This work is important because it takes advantage of one of the few windows into our largely non-transparent election system. These poll tapes are the raw vote totals. We recently conducted a training about this, which, for anyone who wants to learn more, is now [available on video](#).

Being an Actual Vote Hero, as Democracy Counts refers to people who do this work, isn't possible in every state. Our training leads people through the process of determining whether they can do this in their state.

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We've also encouraged people to become poll workers. I want to give a big shout out to anyone reading this who's working the polls this year! It's such important work.

Within the Scrutineers Community, we also encourage people to use whatever skills and strengths they have to work for the cause. It's my personal favorite thing to do, to help individuals find roles to play that will make a difference while being personally meaningful to them.

Jonathan: Do you have any sort of crystal ball for November — not just the horse race but how we'll weather the looming challenges and potential disruptions? Do you think there'll be another January 6 — this year or in 2024-25?

Emily: I think we're in deep trouble. But the wild thing is, even now, just days before the election, it's not too late. If people who care about the freedom to vote, who care that we have future elections where every voice can be heard, who care about democracy — if those people get off their couches and 1) vote, 2) make sure their friends vote, and 3) volunteer, I think we can make it through with a surviving democracy. It's a battered democracy that will still need help, but the alternative is unthinkable.

I hear people say, "I care, but I don't know what I can do that will make a difference." Here's the thing: if you're new to this work, it's not your job to know! In fact, if you're new to this work and you show up declaring "Here's what we should do," that's disrespectful to the folks who have been doing this work for a long time. You don't have to figure it out. All you have to do is show up and ask, "What do you need me to do?" And then do it.

So if you ask me that, here's my answer:

1. Vote
2. Get your friends to vote
3. Take our [one-hour training](#) and volunteer to observe the counting in the days after voting ends. That training is available both live online and on video.
4. Go to <https://scrutineers.org/get-involved/poll-tapes> and find out whether you can be an Actual Vote Hero in your community.
5. Help more people find out about these resources. Use your networks — whether it's social media or a bulletin board in your lunchroom at work, or standing on a corner with a sign.

Bottom line is we need everyone to show up and do what they can — right now.

Jonathan: This has been, and will continue to be, a long, hard battle. I'd like to know what gives you hope, what keeps you going?

Emily: I'm inspired when new people come forward to help with the work. I'm boosted emotionally by every little bit of traction we get.

I used to work myself to the point of burnout. But a few years ago, someone said to me something like, "You activists want everyone to join you and do what you do. But you work yourselves so hard, why would anyone want to be like you?" That really made an impression on me, and has helped me take better care of myself.

Having the community of active Scrutineers has made a big difference, too. It buoys me to know that I'm not alone in this work, that there are others who care enough to learn and take action.

Jonathan: Thanks, Emily, for all the work you do for democracy, and for taking the time, at this busiest of times, to share your thoughts on it.

Authors

[Jonathan D. Simon](#)

[Emily Levy](#)