

Leadership In Election Administration Final Report

Project Title: Leadership in Election Administration Project (LEAP)

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Project Leads: Dr. Bridgett King & Dr. Sharrell McKennie

Executive Summary: Investing in the Architects of Democracy

The Challenge: The Institutional Knowledge Cliff

Election administration in the United States is at a critical juncture. Data confirms the field is overwhelmingly white and aging, with a significant knowledge gap looming as veteran officials exit the workforce. Mid-career professionals, specifically leaders of color, possess the technical expertise to fill this void but are frequently siloed within local jurisdictions. This visibility gap prevents them from accessing the national networks and policy-shaping roles essential for a representative and resilient democracy.

This is a structural failure of a training culture that focuses exclusively on the technical execution of elections, the *how* of legal compliance, while neglecting the *how* of leadership. This creates a technical silo where talented officials are trained to be passive consumers of best practices and processes rather than architects of the field. LEAP acts as a corrective intervention, moving beyond procedural checklists to build the foundational leadership identity required to sustain the profession.

The Intervention: Leadership in Election Administration Project (LEAP)

Operating as a community of practice, LEAP provides a third space and professional networking group for election professionals, too:

- Network with leaders across the election administration ecosystem;
- Enhance and refine their professional identity;
- Increase knowledge and awareness opportunities for visibility and leadership in the field; and
- Cultivate belonging and community within election administration

The Democracy Link

An isolated election official is a vulnerable election official. A networked professional is a resilient leader. By professionalizing the person rather than just the process, LEAP ensures that the front lines of democracy are held by leaders who are supported, visible, and prepared to lead the field into the next decade.

Project Overview: What We Did

The Leadership in Election Administration Project (LEAP) integrates the concepts of third places, professional networking groups, and communities of practice to establish a professional development program in election administration that is not focused on training but on developing



the leadership capacity of professionals in the field. The program was launched as a 12-month pilot program designed to transition career election professionals, specifically leaders of color, from passive consumers of information to active architects. Across in-person and remote meetings, LEAP leverages this intersectional model to break professional isolation and build networks and social capital.

The 2025 Cohort Participant Profile

- Number of Participants: 19
- Experience: 56% had 10 years or less experience in election administration
- Roles/Titles: director, clerk, manager, registrar, special assistant, coordinator
- National Certification: 48% have completed a national certification¹
- State Certification: 60% have completed state certification²
- Geography: 8 states from across the United States
- Age: Ranged from late 20s to early 50s. The average age was 45
- Education: The majority had some college to a graduate degree
- Race: 95% people of color
- Gender: 63% female
- Project Completion: 63% (12 of 19 participants)

Over the course of the program, the cohort engaged in:

Pre-Assessment Survey: Collected information on professional opportunities and baseline information on the experiences of the cohort.

Two High-Impact In-Person Meetings: Focused on networking and relationship building, goal development, authentic peer exchange, identification of strengths, and the development of professional identity tools (bios and elevator pitches). The in-person meetings also featured speakers who are leaders in title and influence across organizations in the ecosystem.

Six Remote Meetings: Introduced participants to LEAP and the broader Election Administration Ecosystem, including Federal agencies, international organizations, opportunities, nonprofit organizations, consultancies, and vendors. Each meeting featured speakers who are leaders across organizations in the ecosystem.

Post-Assessment Survey: Collected information on perceptions of LEAP, career outlook, and trajectory, evaluations of opportunities for networking and future professional development.

Alignment with Program Aims: What We Learned

Aim 1: Create New Opportunities for Professional Development and Networking

¹ CERA with the Election Center

² Excludes states where certification is not available.



The Ecosystem: LEAP views the professional election administration ecosystem as including not only local election officials, their state election offices, and the chief election official, but also other entities that intersect with their work (see figure 1). During the remote meetings, the cohort met with leaders across the ecosystem. During these meetings, the cohort was positioned toward the organizations in the ecosystem, not as passive consumers of information or tools, but as active participants with knowledge, skills, and abilities that could be assets to the organizations.

The exposure to the broader election environment was the most frequently cited benefit of LEAP. Participants felt more professionalized after gaining an understanding of the roles and opportunities within other organizations in the ecosystem.

Professional Branding: 100% of respondents identified the development of professional bios and elevator pitches as a *transformative* baseline. Participants reported that these tools helped them view their skillsets as *transferable* for the first time.

One of the most impactful sessions that I participated in was the work we did on developing a professional bio and refining an elevator pitch. Prior to LEAP, I had not given much thought to either. Through this process I recognized how much knowledge I had gained working with grants and developed a stronger understanding how funding supports secure and reliable election equipment and addresses cybersecurity risks within the industry. Refining my bio and elevator pitch has better equipped me to clearly communicate why investments in our election systems are not optional but essential to maintaining public trust. This has influenced how I frame conversations around funding and communicate support for additional funding in our budget. I now not only feel more confident in my ability to advocate for more resources, and can now clearly see, through my own experience, that I am well qualified to do so. - LEAP Fellow

Figure 1: The Election Administration Ecosystem



Networking: High attendance directly correlated with proactive speaker outreach. Participants who attended >87% of sessions were significantly more likely to contact guest speakers from federal agencies (e.g., the U.S. Election Assistance Commission) and non-profits (e.g., The Center for Technology and Civic Life) via LinkedIn or email following the program.

40% of participants engaged in proactive outreach to national speakers' post-session, a direct indicator of increased professional reach.

Over 90% of respondents felt the program helped them build relationships that would not have existed otherwise. This demonstrates the program's potential to break the geographic silo typical of local election offices.

The Branding Gap: Many officials possess invisible knowledge (e.g., cybersecurity, grant management, logistics) but view it as "just part of the job."

Through the topic discussions, I began to feel like an expert in certain areas of elections, which was both surprising and empowering. - LEAP Fellow

Training vs. Professional Development: The pilot demonstrated that while the cohort is technically proficient, they are often siloed within their jurisdictions. LEAP's value lies in providing the unwritten curriculum of the profession (visibility, branding, and networking) and tools that enable leaders of color to reframe their local expertise as potentially influential at the state and national level in the field.

There are many talented people in election administration who don't know where they fit in the environment. This exposure would give them that boost. - LEAP Fellow

Aim 2: Increase Knowledge and Awareness of Opportunities in the Field

Ecosystem Expansion: Remote sessions successfully broadened participants' awareness of the election administration ecosystem beyond their local jurisdictions. Exposure to international election observation opportunities and specialized consultancies (e.g., The Elections Group) was cited as an impactful area of knowledge growth.

Resource Advocacy: Qualitative feedback suggests participants are now better equipped to frame local funding needs (e.g., cybersecurity grants) within the context of national democratic resilience.

Aim 3: Cultivate Belonging and Community

Peer Exchange: The program's community-of-practice approach successfully established a cohesive network among cohort members. The cohort independently established a communication channel using GroupMe.

The In-Person Premium: While remote sessions provided breadth, in-person workshops



provided depth. Participants described these as "authentic" environments where "the walls were down," leading to significantly higher levels of trust and peer-to-peer idea exchange.

[What I liked most was] the connections to fellow administrators who feel unseen and empowering us to be seen, heard, and felt... - LEAP Fellow

Aim 4: Evaluate the Relationship Between Professional Development and Retention

Commitment to the Field: Survey data suggest that after programming, the LEAP cohort was more likely to apply for roles in other states or sectors (e.g., vendors), reinforcing long-term retention in the field of elections.

Mobility Intentions: The survey revealed a clear split in participant strategy:

Internal Ascendancy: Approximately half of the respondents are focused on rising within their current jurisdiction.

External Mobility: The other half expressed a new willingness to cross state lines or move to different jurisdictions to secure advancement, citing their expanded network as a safety net.

Mobility Readiness: Respondents with advanced degrees reported the highest likelihood of seeking cross-sector roles, indicating that LEAP is a critical tool for retaining top-tier talent in the election administration pipeline.

Professional Mentorship: A key finding is that late-career participants (25+ years) expressed a strong willingness to serve as mentors, indicating that the program creates a sustainable legacy cycle for future cohorts.

Career Trajectory: Professionals often cannot think about their career trajectories when they are only told to focus on *how* to do the job today. LEAP provides vocabulary and resources for professional development and advancement that current professional development opportunities in election administration lack.

Qualitative data showed a profound shift in how officials brand their expertise, moving from *doing the job* to *defining the field*.

LEAP helped me think more intentionally about preparing for my future beyond my current position. It opened my eyes to new opportunities and career paths (in) the election field that I hadn't previously considered. The program encourages you to think beyond your current role, build new skills, and envision a long-term future in election administration. I also appreciated how the program worked with us on developing our bios and emphasized the importance of mentorship. - LEAP Fellow

Aim 5: Recommendations for professional development, retention, and career trajectory



The Invisible Knowledge Paradox

- **Observation:** Election officials possess a vast amount of specialized knowledge (e.g., grant management, cybersecurity, accessibility) but often fail to recognize it as a professional brand or expertise.
- **Impact:** This leads to a tendency to define themselves by their job titles rather than their skills, which limits their mobility and visibility within the broader election ecosystem.
- **Recommendation:** Professional development should include a structured framework that helps election officials explicitly translate daily operational tasks into recognized professional competencies.

The Talent Fit Problem

- **Observation:** Many talented officials "don't know where they fit" in the larger ecosystem
- **Impact:** Talented officials remain siloed in administrative vacuums. Their unique strengths (e.g., policy analysis, technical operations, legal compliance) are under-utilized by national networks and state associations simply because there is no standardized mechanism to align individual capability with regional and national demands
- **Recommendation:** Develop a professional identity curriculum to help election administrators intentionally shift their mindset from "Operator" to "Strategist."

Professional Isolation

- **Observation:** Many participants, particularly those in smaller jurisdictions or from marginalized backgrounds, reported feeling professionally isolated.
- **Impact:** While they are experts in local operations, they often lack the social capital or informal networks required to influence national policy or participate in higher-level administrative discourse.
- **Recommendation:** Election administrators need a platform for public-facing leadership. A broader diversity of election officials from distinct operational backgrounds needs opportunities to co-author brief case studies, white papers, or best-practice memos and deliver public presentations.

Networking Readiness

- **Observation:** There is a high desire for networking, but a lack of formal training on *how* to do it. Participants initially struggled with moving beyond "reverting to job duties" when asked to describe themselves.
- **Impact:** Individuals are unable to articulate their expertise and see themselves as subject matter experts and leaders in the field.
- **Recommendation:** Sessions on elevator pitches and professionalism can provide the literal vocabulary for participants to bridge the gap between "Operator" and "Visionary."

Mentorship Gap

- **Observation:** Many mid-career professionals (even those with over 10 years of



experience) lacked formal mentors in election administration.

- **Impact:** When mid-career and senior administrators operate without structured avenues for peer counseling or ecosystem mentorship, their vast institutional memory becomes an island. Rather than serving as a field-wide resource, their deep expertise remains siloed within the boundaries of their specific jurisdiction.
- **Recommendation:** Create an ecosystem-based, multidirectional network protocol in which mentorship relationships are structured as a peer-to-peer exchange of specialized, high-level competencies across different branches of the field.

The University Bottleneck (Administrative Observation)

- **Observation:** A significant logistical challenge noted by the project team was the slow administrative process at the university level (e.g., grant account setup, hiring delays, website development).
- **Lesson Learned:** The hierarchical, bureaucratic institutional structure of academic institutions is not well-suited to professional development programs like LEAP.
- **Recommendation:** To bypass the university bottleneck and align the project's operational speed with the fast-moving demands of professional development, the project should transition out of the traditional academic ecosystem.

Professional Development in Election Administration

- **Observation:** The current professional development landscape in election administration suffers from a profound investment asymmetry. While existing infrastructure aggressively funds technical execution (the mechanical *how* of implementing state codes and navigating software), it virtually ignores strategic leadership (the *who* and *how* of leading by influence).
- **Impact:** Highly competent LEOs hit an artificial career ceiling. They are structurally trapped as localized executioners because they lack the leadership framework, vocabulary, and macro-level visibility needed to pivot toward higher-level regional or national professional visibility and influence. Over time, without a pipeline, leadership experience and expertise may not keep pace with the evolving professional realities in the field. This can create a disconnect between leaders and the current landscape.
- **Recommendation:** Professional development models in election administration must explicitly include an adaptive leadership & systemic influence curriculum. Programs should treat leadership not as a byproduct of tenure, but as a distinct, teachable, and non-technical professional competency.

Regarding this last recommendation, the LEAP pilot identified a critical intersection between an individual's internal professional identity and their external reach. To address this, the project designed a Theoretical Framework for Professional Development, The Ladders of Engagement, informed by pre- and post-assessment data and researcher observations (Table 1). The LEAP-Election Administration Crosswalk aligns individual progression (LEAP) with external visibility (election administration engagement and visibility) (Figure 2).



Table 1. Theoretical Framework for Professional Development: The Ladders of Engagement.

LEAP Ladder of Engagement		Election Administration Ladder of Engagement	
Role	Description	Role	Description
Aware Observer	Attends or listens, consumes resources, and begins learning about the broader election administration field.	The Operator	Focuses on day-to-day mechanics in their own office, follows existing rules, and has little visibility in professional associations or in spaces where administrative changes or processes are debated.
Reflective Participant	Engages in meetings and starts reflecting on career goals, growth needs, and professional identity.	The Practitioner	Respected within their jurisdiction, with strong local visibility and stakeholder trust, but limited access to broader professional discourse or national research circles.
Career Builder	Uses LEAP tools to strengthen resumes, professional bios, elevator pitches, and self-positioning.	The Contributor	Visible beyond their own office through LEAP-style or other networking, professional listservs, conferences, and committees that evaluate administrative technologies or procedures.
Networked Professional	Builds relationships with cohort peers and develops stronger connections across the election ecosystem.	The Strategist	Highly visible in professional networks, leads working groups, helps model what works, and influences field-wide agendas and professional standards.
Opportunity Seeker	Explores new pathways, considers roles across sectors, and uses connections to identify next professional steps.	The Visionary	Shapes national priorities, speaks at major conferences, and is consulted by federal (e.g., the Election Assistance Commission) or international bodies (e.g., International IDEA) to serve on boards.
Field Leader / Mentor	Recommends LEAP, supports peers, and contributes to the leadership and mentorship pipeline.		



Figure 2. LEAP-Election Administration Crosswalk



The Leadership in Election Administration Project Moving Forward

Recruitment, Selection, and Attrition: To ensure success and reduce attrition, LEAP needs to utilize a more precise participant profile that can be communicated during recruitment. The requirement of a statement of interest from a potential participant, a recommendation letter, or a letter of support from a supervisor may also be considered.

Accountability: During recruitment and program introduction, expectations regarding remote attendance (e.g., participation and camera use) need to be clearly communicated. Processes need to be adopted that allow for the removal of participants who do not adhere to these expectations.

Mentorship: With the 2025 Cohort, we initially aimed to achieve immediate mentorship matching, but observations revealed a foundational readiness gap. We discovered that many career professionals are not yet prepared for high-level mentorship because they lack a baseline understanding of their leadership identity beyond daily, task-driven legal compliance roles.

The 2025 cohort demonstrated that a psychological identity shift must occur before formal mentorship begins. Additionally, mentorship should not be viewed as a "plug-and-play" solution in this field. Future cohorts will utilize an alumni mentorship infrastructure to create a peer-to-



mentor connection. This will enable graduating fellows to serve as the first line of mentorship for the incoming cohort, fostering a sustainable leadership loop.

1-on-1 mentorship sessions to bridge the mentorship gap will also be integrated.

Participation: While remote sessions provided consistent touchpoints, in-person meetings (Houston and Kentucky) served as the primary catalyst for deep social capital formation. Future cohorts will leverage the value of in-person meetings by increasing the number of in-person meetings from one to four each cohort year. The PI and project manager will maximize the geographic location of potential in-person meetings, taking into consideration participant travel time and cost.

Remote meetings will occur between in-person meetings for ecosystem introduction and sustained connection.

Strategic Scheduling: Transitioning to a March-to-March annual cycle designed to avoid busy election periods (specifically April/May primaries during even years). To ensure minimal jurisdictional disruption, in-person meetings will use a fly-on-Friday, full-day Saturday, half-day Sunday format.

Public presentation: Election officials need more opportunities to practice presenting themselves and their professional expertise. With an increase in in-person meetings, future cohorts will have more opportunities to practice the elevator pitches in a supportive environment. Additionally, participants will create a formal presentation of their expertise (e.g., a PPT presentation that could be delivered at a professional meeting)

Branding: A LEAP Badge will provide a tangible credential for professional portfolios.

Collaboration: The project should investigate opportunities for continued in-person connection through existing convenings in election administration (e.g., The Election Center Annual National Conference; Partnership for Large Jurisdictions). Collaborations such as these might also be used to reduce the cost of meeting space, fulfilling room blocks, and other logistical challenges.

Conclusion

Social Capital as Democratic Infrastructure

The LEAP project has 1) identified significant gaps in the current election administration professionalization infrastructure, 2) demonstrated that the professional isolation of election officials is a systemic risk to the stability of our democratic processes, and 3) provided a roadmap for bridging the technical expertise/strategic leadership pipeline. By investing in the social capital of election professionals, we are not just training individuals; we are building a resilient, networked, professional election administration infrastructure. When election officials are connected throughout the election administration ecosystem, they are more likely to persist in the field, preserve institutional knowledge, and lead the next generation through the complexities of modern election administration. A networked election official is a resilient election official.



Providing these leaders with the visibility tools and peer support systems identified in this report is an essential investment in the stability and representativeness of our democratic institutions. Continued financial support is necessary to scale up to move from an experimental pilot to a sustainable leadership pipeline.

