



# “Yeah, I'll tell you what, it's a lot easier when you're deputy.”: The Challenges and Responsibilities Of County Clerks

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# Why County Clerks?

- ▶ County governments and their officials are understudied
- ▶ Dual role of administrator and elected official
- ▶ Majority are women
- ▶ Opportunity to explore an often overlooked office and the gender dynamics at play for those serving

# The Experiences of County Clerks

- ▶ Position/Administrative responsibilities
- ▶ Navigating politics both as an elected official and as an elections official
- ▶ Gendered nature of the position

# Interviews

- ▶ Research team interviewed 23 County Clerks in a Plains state during the spring/summer of 2023
  - 20 were women
  - All geographic regions in the state are included
  - Mix of county type by population density
- ▶ Interviews were conducted in-person and using Zoom

# Interviews

- ▶ Semi-structured
- ▶ Topics included:
  - Pathway to the office of County Clerk
  - Political/campaign experiences
  - Role responsibilities
  - Challenges faced while serving as clerk

# Challenges To Doing The Job

## ► General Challenges

- Drop Ins
- Unusual and surprising job duties
- Politics and Elections
- Turnover
- Nobody knows what we do

## ► Unaware of Gender

- Dropping things on them
- Unusual and surprising job duties
- Politics
- Turnover
- Nobody knows what we do

## Aware of Gender

- Not paid well
- Secretarial work
- Being trained on the job
- Interactions with other officials

# What Do We Do?

“They [general public] don't understand the process.”

- White man, semi-urban county, bachelor's degree

“We feel like sometimes we're the transfer, you know, the call center. Here to there. A lot of people get us confused with the clerk of the District Court.”

- White woman, rural, some college

“...nobody knows what we do...”

- White woman, rural, some college

“a lot of people don't realize that, How much we actually do.”

-male

# The Drop In

"...just start over every time you get interrupted because we'll never get anywhere. So we don't have private offices. And that's something I've brought up to a commissioner, [and he said].., we want you to be available to the public. Yeah, well. I also can't get a lot done when the public walks in all the time."

- White and Native American woman, rural county, master's degree

"...well, here comes a county commissioner in the door right now. And if you guys weren't in here, he'd step in here. That's just how my day is. My staff calls it the revolving door. I mean, if it's not a staff member within this office, it's a county commissioner, It's a department head for council, because with me being here, so long, a lot of department heads lean on me for advice and guidance and you know, different things."

- White man, semi-urban county, bachelor's degree



# The Role of Gender

“I don’t know, you made me think about that. Because I was going to be totally 100% honest, a man would probably be treated different. I don't know why I say that. But that's kind of my internal thinking...I would love to be a secretary right now sitting behind a desk doing secretarial work...I know, we do have some men that are county clerks, and they're great. So I don't know how they get treated there.

...Now that you put it out there never thought of it. (Interviewer: Yeah.) but that's true.

- White woman, dense rural county, associate's degree.

“...so as I say our neighboring communities have much different cultures....It's just a fact of the matter. I mean, some of my staff has gone over to well I won't name the county, but a neighboring county and they were just surprised the unprofessionalism, the language which people spoke, and dressed in the office and they're not far away from our community. You know, it's just amazing. It's more about it's not about gender, I feel and most of those counties it's more about the culture of the community.”

- White man, semi-urban county, bachelor’s degree,

# What Do All of These Challenges Mean?

- ▶ No one knows what they do
- ▶ They have a lot of power and responsibility but...
- ▶ Are really devalued
- ▶ There is a lot of chaos making
- ▶ Clerks are leaving

# Politics

"...it's terrifying to think, who's going to come after us, you know, who's going to come and claim that we're doing something wrong when every clerk that I've met in the state honestly is doing their best and would never, you know, mess up an election or throw an election but that doesn't stop the conspiracy theory? ...and it's really frustrating because if they ever would just come work in an election, they could see how hard it would be but and I mean, they all think it's just so easy."

- White and Native American woman, rural county, master's degree

"...I've been sued by the Democratic Party for gerrymandering in [Capital City], and the head of the Democrats are attorney but when they actually did the study, they found that if I was gerrymandering, I was helping the Democrats. So you know, they're just accusations because of the politics."

- White man

"...So that is one thing that keeps me up at night. It's like, Oh, my God, I hope those ballots are ready...And those outside forces are still there...they're never going away."

-White woman, dense rural county, associate's degree