

# **Vote Centers Add Voter Convenience, Reduce Election Day Problems, and Provide Long-Term Cost Savings**

Comments in Denver, Colorado on August 2012 by Dana DeBeauvoir, Travis County Clerk, Austin, Texas

Travis County, Texas has used Election Day vote centers in three elections including a November 2011 Constitutional Amendment Election, a May 2012 election for numerous local entities, and the November 2012 Presidential Election.

Election Day vote centers are another name for countywide polling places. Instead of requiring voters to vote at their precinct polling locations, vote centers allow all registered voters in Travis County the option of voting at any of the county's polling locations on Election Day. It allows Election Day polling places to operate in a similar way to Early Voting locations. To prevent persons from voting in more than one location on Election Day, each vote center location transmits/receives real-time information of voter names to/from a centralized location.

The benefits we hoped vote centers would provide were:

1. **Giving voters more Election Day options and greater convenience.** For example, a voter could vote close to work if there is not sufficient time to get back to his/her neighborhood polling location before the polls close.
2. **Eliminating voter confusion about where to vote on Election Day.** Because we have such a mobile population, voters who sometimes only vote once every two or four years, and polling places that sometimes change, there is a significant number of voters each election who do not know their precinct polling location. For example, in the previous November 2010 election, more than 80% (5,747) of the phone calls we received were from persons asking for the location of their precinct polling place.
3. **Reducing problems with less-than-ideal facilities used as polling locations.** This is particularly important when trying to find locations that best serve an area and have good disability access, parking, and sufficient space for an organized workflow.
4. **Reducing the use of elementary schools used as polling locations.** Our goal is to avoid using elementary schools whenever possible to prevent any potential security or safety issues involving young children. Sometimes, however, there are no other public facilities available in a precinct.
5. **Reducing the number of provisional votes that are cast each election.** Approximately 25% of the provisional ballots cast in the previous November election were related to persons unsure about their precinct of residency.
6. **Providing voters a service they really wanted.** According to the surveys we had seen, voters liked this concept. Some studies had even made assumptions that vote centers increase voter turnout.

A handful of other Texas counties had gone before us and most had used the strategy of significantly reducing the number of Election Day polling locations in an attempt to dramatically save costs. These counties ran into problems we hoped to avoid:

1. **Complaints that polling places had moved too far away from neighborhoods** thereby potentially disenfranchising poor, disabled, or elderly voters and persons with transportation issues.
2. **Long lines at some polling locations** (especially between 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.) when voters arrived in mass at a particularly popular site.

To see if our voters would be interested in this idea, we convened a countywide citizen's panel and held a public hearing. At those events, we found support for the idea of vote centers from a broad range of citizens representing diverse political, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Those that did not like the idea were

concerned about taking away the neighborhood/community aspect of Election Day voting. We also heard from many who did not want us to make any cut in the current number of polling locations we were providing.

Our first try was for the November 2011 Constitutional Amendment Election, an election where there is traditionally a lower turnout. We took our citizens' comments to heart and used most of our regular precinct locations. (NOTE: in hindsight, we strongly recommend counties adopt a similar strategy of minimizing a reduction in the number of Election Day polling locations.) After the election, we found all of our goals had been exceeded. For example:

- **There was heavy use of the program in Travis County.** Of the 29,707 voters who voted on Election Day, approximately 32% (9,516) of Election Day voters voted outside of their precinct.
- **Use of vote centers was high across the entire county.**

Of the voters who turned out on Election Day and were registered in	Comm Pct 1	approximately	37%	voted outside their neighborhood precinct.
	Comm Pct 2		31%	
	Comm Pct 3		28%	
	Comm Pct 4		30%	

- **Voters reported that they liked vote centers.** Feedback from voters was obtained via phone, email, Facebook, election workers, activists, representatives from local jurisdictions participating in the election, and members of the County Clerk's Election Task Force. During the election, no complaints about vote centers were received by our office or by the Texas Secretary of State.
- **A study suggests Travis County's vote center program increased turnout.** Robert Stein with Rice University and Greg Vonnahme with the University of Missouri-Kansas City examined Travis County's implementation of vote centers using statistical analysis, exit polling, phone calling, and mailers. Their findings state: *"Travis County is one of the largest counties to adopt Election Day vote centers and the analyses show that the reform increased turnout in the county. We also find that individuals that were initially the least predisposed to vote were the most likely to utilize the vote centers."* Their results suggest that the use of open polling locations increased turnout by 1.41% in Travis County.

**Vote Centers were Beneficial following Redistricting and Extremely Popular in the Presidential Election**

In Travis County, redistricting created 29 new precincts that were to take affect for the November 2012 Presidential Election. Instead of adding 29 new polling places, we left everything the same. As a result, voters did not have to determine whether or not they had a new polling place, and the County saved approximately \$500,000 of costs that would have been needed to provide equipment and personnel to operate these additional precincts. This election was one of the smoothest elections we have ever experienced, and our voters could not have been more complimentary.

**We've Gotten More Sophisticated with Strategies to Reduce Lines**

Initially, we used twitter reports from citizens to provide information on voting wait times. We now electronically gather information from each polling location that shows how many people have voted and approximately how long someone will have to wait in line. This information is provided on an internet page available for public viewing.

**We Are Expanding!**

As a result of Texas' last regular legislative session, we can now offer vote center elections during primaries.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide comments. Please let me know if you would like any additional information.