

League of Women Voters of Texas Education Fund *Voting Procedures to Increase Voting Participation*

Election Day Centralized Voting

Facts and Issues

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Election Day Centralized Voting is referred to by a variety of terms, including Vote Center, super precincts, and mega-precincts. These are polling places at which any registered voter in the political subdivision holding the election may vote, regardless of the precinct in which the voter lives.

In some states, Vote Centers are open multiple days or weeks prior to Election Day.¹ Thirty-two states, including Texas, use Vote Centers for early voting. “Convenience voting,” which allows this to happen on election day, is being tested in several states, including Texas, where the Texas Legislature has authorized pilot projects since the 2005 legislative session. Experience in North Carolina has revealed some of the limitations of mega-precincts.

There are many pros and cons for Election Day Centralized Voting, and both sides of the issue have valid points. For many it may be convenient to vote away from their precinct and close to where they have business, while other voters may want or need a place close to their homes. Vote Centers require real-time voter rolls with electronic voting, which immediately updates a person’s voting record as having voted, thus eliminating the possibility anyone can vote more than once. Vote Centers require less equipment than is needed if each precinct houses a polling place. Other pros and cons may be found below and in the discussion of limitations of large voting precincts.

Benefits of Election Day Centralized Voting:

- Has the potential to increase voter turnout by eliminating the requirement to vote at a specific location. Some voters may not have time to get to their precinct on election day.
- Eliminates the need for a provisional ballot if a voter is at the wrong precinct. While provisional ballots are counted for various reasons, they are not counted if a voter is at the wrong precinct.
- Provides voters with consistent locations so they know where they may always vote.
- Provides voters with multiple voting locations for convenience on election day.
- Cuts down the number of poll workers needed. It is becoming more and more difficult to find qualified election clerks and judges.
- Reduces the number of physical locations required. Finding polling places and making sure they comply with the Americans with Disability Act is becoming more difficult. Many schools are refusing to be polling places.
- Reduces logistical problems, so less time is spent delivering and servicing equipment.

- Reduces cost by reducing the number of poll workers, physical locations, and amount of equipment needed for an election.

Negative Consequences of Election Day Centralized Votingⁱⁱ

- May disenfranchise poor, disabled, or elderly voters, and any person with transportation issues, as the consolidated polling places may be farther away.
- Creates more need for touch-screen Direct Record Electronic (DRE) voting machines as a voter must vote electronically in real time in the centralized voting precinct model.
- Creates dependency on electronic poll books that use an Internet connection, thus increasing exposure to computer hackers.
- Creates a homeland security risk by bringing together larger number of voters at a Vote Center than would be at a precinct polling place.
- May result in long lines at the polls.

Setting up Vote Centers or mega-precincts requires consideration of the *number* of voters they will serve and the impacts this could have. A mega-precinct generally is defined as a voting location that serves more than 2,000 voters. In North Carolina, one legislator recommended Vote Centers serve more than 10,000 voters per center.

In addition to the accessibility issues associated with traveling farther to the polls, Vote Centers also bring more cars to the location. Highly urbanized areas may experience problems with traffic congestion that coincides with the peak voting hours before and after traditional work hours.

When they reach the polls, voters in large precincts may face the prospect of long lines, particularly during peak voting hours. In past elections, the North Carolina State Board of Elections office received many calls from individuals reporting congested polling places and excessive waiting to cast a ballot. In some cases, these potential voters indicated they did not have the chance to vote due to the inconvenience arising from these factors.

Being sure that voters receive the correct ballot is also an issue that must be addressed in mega-precincts. Mega-precincts, especially those that encompass large geographic areas, are more likely to be split among various districts for the same offices. For example, two or more state senate or state house seats may represent different portions of the same mega-precinct. As a result, election officials in this “split precinct” must properly administer multiple ballots and ensure that individuals cast ballots only for the races in which they are qualified to vote. Historically, the use of multiple ballot styles in a split precinct has created confusion on the part of some election officials and voters.

Texas Test of the Countywide Voting Location Conceptⁱⁱⁱ

Texas has been testing the concept of Election Day Centralized Voting, countywide. Action taken by the 81st Legislature in 2009 authorizes a third pilot project. In 2005, the 79th Legislature enacted House Bill 758, requiring the Texas Secretary of State to create a pilot program in one or more counties to test the countywide voting concept. Lubbock County ran a successful

countywide voting location pilot for the November 2006 General Election. In 2007, the 80th Legislature authorized another pilot program for 2008 for the May uniform election and the November Presidential election. Several changes were made from 2006, including the requirement that the total number of polling places not be reduced to less than 50% of the number of existing polling places. Erath and Lubbock Counties participated and reported successful elections. Erath County reduced 20 regular county voting locations to 11. Lubbock County reduced 69 voting locations to 50. (Recognizing the exceptional turnout possible in the November 4, 2008 election, Lubbock opted not to reduce the number of locations by fifty percent.)

Because of the limited participation, the secretary of state recommended that the 81st Legislature extend the pilot program. It was thought that an “off year” election might allow more counties to participate with the voting center concept. With information from a wider group of counties, the secretary of state could make a more informed recommendation to the 82nd Legislature for permanent legislation.

The 81st Texas Legislature authorized five counties to conduct pilot projects: three counties with a population of 100,000 or more and two counties with a population of less than 100,000. The law (HB 719) takes effect September 1, 2009. ^{iv} The secretary of state must implement a program allowing the commissioners court of each county selected for the pilot program to eliminate county election precincts and establish countywide polling places for each general election for state and county officers, each countywide election held on the uniform election date in May, each election on a proposed constitutional amendment, and each election of a political subdivision located in the county that is held jointly with the elections above.

The secretary of state will select the five counties. The commissioners court of a county that applies for the pilot program must hold a public hearing to obtain input and submit it with the application. Among the requirements, the county must have a computerized voter registration list that allows an election officer to verify the voter has not previously voted in the election. The county must use direct recording electronic (DRE) voting machines. The secretary of state must provide for an audit of these machines. The total number of countywide polling places may not be less than 50% of the number of precinct polling places that would otherwise be needed for that election. If the county is participating in the program for the first year, the reduction of polling places may not be less than 65%.

Options for Addressing Election Day Centralized Voting Issues

Some feel that it will be necessary to provide the best of both traditional and Vote Center methodologies, combined with new concepts, to allow all voters unlimited access to their right to vote. Proposals include:

- Work with multiple community groups in the selection of Vote Center sites to assure easy access for all racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups of voters.
- Unlimited access to vote by mail, with no restrictions for those voters with transportation or mobility issues or who simply want the convenience. This would assure that no one is excluded from voting.

- Changes to electronic voting machines that would make them acceptable to voters concerned about the lack of a paper record.

Election Day Centralized Voting may work in some counties and not in others. The differences between urban and rural settings may make a large difference in the success of this concept. The Texas Legislature, by allowing pilot programs, has allowed each county to decide if they would like to test this voting procedure and decide upon its validity for their voters. From these pilots will come useful information to help Texas determine whether and how to use Vote Centers on election day.

NOTES

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ⁱ Vote Centers or Super Precincts, Poll Tax for the 21st Century, By Joyce McCloy, Founder of the North Carolina Coalition for Verified Voting. See www.ncvoter.net

ⁱⁱ Vote Centers or Super Precincts, Poll Tax for the 21st Century, By Joyce McCloy, Founder of the North Carolina Coalition for Verified Voting. See www.ncvoter.net

ⁱⁱⁱ Report to the 81st Legislature on House Bill 3105, Relating to Countywide Polling Place Pilot Program, www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/pilot1.shtml

^{iv} 81st Legislature , House Bill 719, Relating to Polling Places for Certain Elections