

Early voting at the Galleria at Sunset, Clark County, Nevada.



COURTESY OF HARVARD LOMAX

By William H. Woodwell, Jr.

Thinking Outside the

BALLOT

BOX

With 110 stores and a 600-seat food court, the Galleria at Sunset has become a wildly popular place to shop among residents of Henderson, NV, and nearby Las Vegas. It also has become a wildly popular place to vote. In the two weeks leading up to

the 2004 presidential election, more than 40,000 Clark County residents took advantage of Nevada's early voting law and cast their ballots at the Galleria.

In 2004, 271,000 people voted early in fast-growing Clark County. This total represents half of all voters in the county, which includes Las Vegas.

"Early voting is extremely effective and extremely popular with voters here. They really like it," said Harvard "Larry" Lomax, Clark County's registrar of voters.

Lomax's enthusiasm is shared by many other elections officials—and, more importantly, by hundreds of thousands of voters across the country who are taking

advantage of new opportunities to avoid the Election Day rush. The popularity of early voting is emblematic of a broader shift in U.S. elections toward what some label “convenience voting.” The motivation for this shift: Requiring voters to go to one place on one day during a specific period of time just doesn’t work in a highly mobile, time-crunched society.

“We are still voting the same way we did 150 years ago, and we don’t live that way any more,” said Scott Doyle, who manages elections in Larimer County, Colorado.

Welcome to the “Vote Center”

In Larimer County, the inspiration for changes at the polling place came in 2000, when hundreds of voters lined up inside the county courthouse in Fort Collins on election night. Turned away from other polling sites because their names did not show up on the voter lists, they had been directed to the courthouse to resolve the problems and, hopefully, cast their votes. As the polls closed, however, so did the courthouse doors. Anyone arriving late lost their opportunity to vote.

“I remember feeling just terrible about those arriving late being denied their right to vote,” recalled Doyle. “There’s no way around it: they were disenfranchised.”

Elected Larimer County’s clerk and recorder in 2003, Doyle has used the county’s 2000 experience to highlight some of the problems associated with precinct-based voting. And, he has drawn considerable attention to an alternative approach: “vote centers” where anyone can vote.

In recent years, a number of states and localities nationwide have embraced vote centers as a potential antidote to Election Day confusion, long lines and other problems.

In the 2004 general election, Larimer County ditched precinct-based voting entirely and set up 31 vote centers in municipal facilities, county buildings, large churches, hotels and storefronts. The county’s move came after Colorado legislators passed a bill allowing the use of vote centers in general elections.

Research by Professor Robert M. Stein of Rice University indicated that Larimer

County’s use of vote centers in 2004 led to a higher voter turnout when compared to previous elections in that county, as well as neighboring counties without the centers.

“It’s just a much more convenient option for voters, and the results prove it,” Doyle said.

In addition to the added convenience for voters, Doyle said vote centers are beneficial for the county. For example, it would have taken 1,000 poll workers (or “judges”) to staff 143 precincts in the county in 2004. The 31 vote centers required only 500 judges. In addition, because county residents are allowed to vote anywhere, vote centers reduce the number of provisional ballots that have to be issued to voters whose status cannot be verified at the polling place.

Boone County, MO, is another local jurisdiction that has enthusiastically embraced the approach and can talk about early results. It is probably not a coincidence that two of the U.S. counties that are early adopters of vote centers are university towns. Larimer County has Colorado State University, while Boone County is home to the University of Missouri. Boone County Clerk Wendy Noren said the large population of local students was a critical factor in her advocacy of what she calls “central polls.”

As Noren explained it, central polls are designed as “go to” places for students and other voters who are uncertain about where they should vote. Unlike Larimer County, Boone County uses central polls as an adjunct to its regular, precinct-based polling places. “We mostly gear central polls to people who might have a problem,” Noren said.

Although students are a focus, Boone County’s central polls also are targeted at others who are new to the county or who have changed their address. Sixty percent of local residents move between elections, Noren said. She added: “Everyone is in constant motion.”

In 2004, voters in Boone County could go to any of nine central polls, in addition to more than 80 precincts. Predictably, the most heavily trafficked central poll that year was located in the heart of the University of Missouri campus. “Having that place on campus met the students’ needs while also relieving overcrowding at other precincts nearby,” Noren said.

Despite her enthusiasm about central polls, Noren is leery of the idea of entirely replacing precinct-based voting with a limited number of voting locations. Because of transportation challenges facing many voters, including students, people with disabilities and lower-income residents,



Early voting at a grocery store in Clark County, Nevada.

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Noren said that precincts continue to play an important role in ensuring that voting remains convenient for all.

The Advent of Early Voting

Clark County, Nevada, established eight “permanent” early voting sites in 2004, including the Galleria at Sunset. Most of the sites were major shopping centers where the county could place anywhere from 25 to 50 voting machines during the early voting period. In addition, eight mobile teams traveled to different locations in the county during the two weeks preceding the election to set up temporary voting sites in supermarkets, libraries, community centers and other locations.

Clark County began its early voting program in 1994, after the Nevada legislature passed the state’s first early voting law. With every election, according to Lomax, the county’s registrar, the percentage of voters taking advantage of early voting has grown.

One reason for the popularity of early voting in Clark County, he said, is that the county makes a special effort to “go where the people are” by setting up polls in shopping centers and other high-traffic locations. While Election Day crowds tend to be “grumpy and irritated,” Lomax noted, early voters are “happy voters.” The reason? “They aren’t being forced to vote on a certain day at a certain place. This is their choice, and they feel they are in control of when and how they are voting,” he declared.

Lomax characterized Clark County’s early voting program as “an unqualified success.” However, administering the program has its challenges. A major challenge is finding suitable locations. As available floor space in the area’s shopping malls has filled up with increasing numbers of kiosk-type stores, mall owners grow more hesitant in their negotiations with the county.

“Where we used to have no problem finding space for 40 or 50 machines, now it is more of an issue to talk our way in,” Lomax said.

County Clerk Dana DeBeauvoir, Travis County, TX, reports a similar challenge. Ever since Texas legislators passed the Lone Star State’s first early voting law in 1987, Travis

County, home to the state capital of Austin, has been a pioneer in advancing the concept. In 2004, county voters could choose from 25 early voting locations—well above the minimal five required under state law.

DeBeauvoir pays special attention to maintaining friendly relationships with retailers and others who host early voting locations. She offers public praise and thanks through letters to the editor, awards, proclamations, news coverage and other public communications.

“You really have to work with these places and listen to them and let them decide where is the best place to put you,” DeBeauvoir said. “They want to help, but the reality is these are businesses and you are occupying their floor space.”

Despite the challenges of finding the right locations, DeBeauvoir considers the county’s early voting a success. As in Clark County, Travis County offers both permanent and mobile early voting sites. The mobile polling

places are mostly in low-density, rural areas. They are open for a half or a whole day at community centers, senior activity centers, libraries and other locations.

In recent elections, at least 50 percent of Travis County voters took advantage of early voting. DeBeauvoir calls it a “very popular program with voters.” “As elections administrator, I really feel the love from voters for having these places where they are,” she added.

With an additional 10 percent of Travis County voters using absentee mail-in ballots, the county serves just 40 percent of voters on Election Day. “A lot of your work is already done on Election Day,” DeBeauvoir declared.

Ann McGeehan, director of elections in the Texas Secretary of State’s office, added that early voting has been “well received” in the state. While elections officials at first were slow to embrace the concept, in large part because of the added administrative requirements, the enthusiastic response of Texas voters has kept the critics of early voting at bay. For the first time ever in 2004, more Texans voted early (including absentee voting) than voted on Election Day.

Vote Centers: Pros and Cons

Convenience

PRO: Voters have more choices about where to vote.

CON: If the sites are not distributed evenly, problems may arise for voters who cannot travel longer distances due to lack of access to transportation.

Efficiency

PRO: Staffing and equipment needs are reduced if counties use a smaller number of voting locations.

CON: Long lines could be a problem if too many voters arrive at one vote center simultaneously.

Planning and Administration

PRO: Fewer people showing up at the wrong polling places means fewer headaches (and fewer provisional ballots) for voters and elections officials alike.

CON: Vote centers can make it harder to plan for how many voters will show up—and when.

“People Are in Control”

Early voting and the use of vote centers are just two innovations that elections officials around the country are experimenting with in their efforts to make the voting process more efficient and more convenient—and, ultimately, to put the “service” back into “Voters Services.”

Brian Newby, election commissioner of Johnson County, KS, which offers an early voting program of its own, said he believes the added convenience from early voting and other reforms will lead to an upturn in voter participation. “People are now in control of when they vote, and there should not be any reason why you can’t vote,” he said. ■

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