

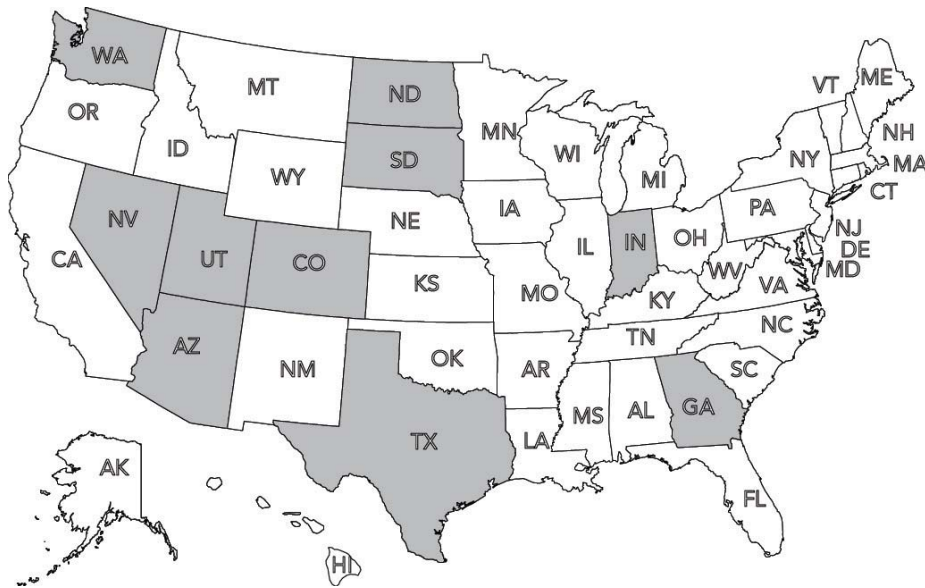
# Vote Centers

No Wrong Place to Vote:  
Four Counties' Views on Vote Centers



Voter Convenience  
=  
Increased Turnout  
on Election Day

# Convenience Voting



According to the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), at least 10 states, plus American Samoa, permit voter centers.

## Cost Savings

Vote center counties have the option of consolidating polling places into fewer sites, they require less equipment, fewer poll workers, and less driving around to deliver voting machines and supplies.

# No Wrong Place to Vote

Turning registered voters away on Election Day is not a high point in an election judge's day. But if voters turn up at the wrong precinct or arrive after the polls close (possibly because they went to the wrong polling place first, then had to race across town), they cannot be permitted to vote.

This is exactly the scenario that spurred Scott Doyle, County Clerk in Larimer County, Colorado, to dream up an alternative to precinct-based voting—Election Day vote centers. The concept was born in 2000. In 2003, Larimer County was the first in the nation to depart from precinct-specific polling places as it rolled out its vote center program.

In the near-decade that has passed, eight additional states have passed legislation that paves the way for vote centers in jurisdictions that choose to use them.

Many vote center jurisdictions have adopted Colorado's slogan, "With Vote Centers, there is no wrong place to vote!" This is because, similar to Early Voting polling places, vote centers are open on Election Day to anyone in the jurisdiction who is registered to vote.

Convenience has become the hallmark of the vote center movement. Released from the necessity to set up a polling place in each precinct, jurisdictions are freed to place fewer, larger centers wherever people gather for day-to-day activities—shopping malls,

restaurants, civic centers, and the like. This means that voters, many of whom shop, work, worship, and take their children to school outside their own neighborhoods, have a convenient array of choices for a place to vote.

It also means jurisdictions have more location options and can more easily select sites that are easy to access by car or bus, have ample parking, and are fully ADA-compliant.

One important offshoot of voter convenience is increased turnout on Election Day. According to a 2007 study co-authored by Rice University professor Robert Stein, vote centers can increase voter turnout by as much as 10 percent.

Cost savings can be significant as well. Because vote center counties have the option of consolidating polling places into fewer sites, they require less equipment, fewer poll workers, and less driving around to deliver voting machines and supplies.

## Vote Center Timeline

2003

Larimer County, Colorado conducted the first vote center election

2007

Indiana began a pilot project in three counties

2010

North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee and Texas had begun pilot projects

2011 -  
2012

Additional states passed legislation to permit (but not require) all jurisdictions to use vote centers

Enhanced voter convenience, increased voter turnout, cost savings—if moving from precinct-based voting to Election Day vote centers offered these benefits to your jurisdiction, would you make the move? Elections officials across the U.S. are asking themselves this question as an increasing number of states pass legislation to permit vote centers.

Hart InterCivic had the privilege of talking with four of our customers who have adopted the vote center approach. These elections administrators were generous in sharing their experiences and tips for success:

- Dorothy Kennedy, Elections Administrator, Lubbock County, Texas
- Jo Ann Stewart, Clerk of Courts, Wayne County, Indiana
- Beth Liming, Clerk of Courts, Cass County, Indiana
- Dana DeBeauvoir, County Clerk, Travis County, Texas

What were the deciding factors that tipped the scale in favor of vote centers for these early adopters? What contributed most to the success of their programs? What words of wisdom do they have for other county officials who are considering making the switch to vote centers, or who are simply examining the implications of the trend?

# Deciding Factors

## Lubbock County, Texas

Lubbock County was Texas' vote center pioneer, holding the State's first vote center election in November 2006. As Elections Administrator Dorothy Kennedy describes her jurisdiction's foray into this new scheme for polling places, "Legislation came through in 2005 that was going to allow Harris County to conduct a vote center pilot countywide. My thought was, 'We can do this. We will work with legislators to open the pilot up for other counties.'"

When Texas made the pilot program available to counties statewide, Lubbock was the only county that opted in. What was Kennedy's motivation? Vote centers would be more convenient for voters, more efficient for election administrators, and less expensive for the County. Most important to Kennedy and her team, providing consistent polling places for every election would result in higher voter turnout. She added, "We could go from 69 Election Day locations to a smaller number that could still handle the same volume of voters." And here's the bonus—after the first year, the County has realized a 15-20 percent cost savings on each of its vote center elections.

## Wayne County, Indiana

In May of 2007, Wayne County became the first Indiana jurisdiction to use vote centers in a live election. They had joined Indiana's pilot program in which the Secretary of State tested the vote center concept with a sampling of small, medium, and large counties. The primary driver for Wayne County was the ongoing challenge of providing voting facilities for all 58 precincts—facilities that were accessible to all voters and poll workers and that complied with Help America Vote Act (HAVA) requirements for paved parking, stair-free movement, wide doorways and electronic entrances.

Clerk of Courts Jo Ann Stewart said of her decision to participate in the pilot, "Indiana had sent a group out to Larimer County to study its vote center program, to see if it might be something we would want to test or implement here. More and more counties were having difficulty finding precinct locations that were HAVA compliant. Originally, we didn't jump into this thinking, 'let's do this to save money.' But we managed to actually save some money, both immediately and in the long run."

## Four Vote Center Counties

### Cass County, Indiana

Beth Liming, Clerk of Courts in Indiana's Cass County, agreed that being able to select more ideal sites for voting on Election Day was the number one reason to move to vote centers.

Liming also pointed out, "In this last primary, vote centers versus traditional, we saved almost \$25,000 here in Cass County. It would have been even more, but I had more clerical assistance in this election because of my name being on the ballot this time."

### Travis County, Texas

Back in Texas, Travis County followed Lubbock County's lead in instituting vote centers by conducting its November 2011 constitutional amendment election in this fashion. For Travis County, the focus of the initiative was to remove obstacles for voters.

Travis County Clerk Dana DeBeauvoir said, "We had heard of Lubbock County's positive experience with vote centers. We were impressed with how convenient the method was for voters, so we started checking into it." DeBeauvoir and company, determined not to disturb neighborhood polling place options for voters who choose to vote close to home, retained nearly all of Travis County's original precinct-specific locations. For voters, vote centers offered the choice of voting at the school or church on the corner, or voting at any other polling place in the County.

## Action for Success

The verdict is in for vote centers in the four counties we quizzed: the centers are a win/win for voters, poll workers, and elections officials. The voters like the ease of voting in the location of their choice. Poll workers appreciate the more structured training and assignment of roles that is possible with fewer, larger polling places. Elections officials appreciate the flexibility and control the vote center approach lends the administration process. Additionally, it is a great relief to all stakeholders that voters are less likely to be turned away from the polling place.

### Learn from those who've gone before.

When the elections team in Lubbock County decided to explore the option of going with vote centers, they started with a trip to Colorado to observe vote centers in action during the primaries there. The Lubbock contingent split up into two groups, each made up of a commissioners' court representative, an IT specialist, a facilities maintenance professional, and a key elections administration staff member (including Kennedy). One group spent the day following the election in Fort Collins (Larimer County, a vote center veteran) and the other in Aurora (Denver County, conducting its first vote center election).

Kennedy commented, "Everyone got to look at the election process as a whole. Then we were able to learn from our counterparts, take notes, take pictures. They were very gracious hosts. We came back, and everyone shared their experiences from the trip. Instead of re-inventing the wheel, we tweaked the wheel a

bit for Lubbock County and the law that was in place in Texas."

### Be picky about locations.

Since vote centers' primary reason for being is to provide convenience and accessibility to voters, location is everything. Consider the way traffic flows in your community—where and how people travel. Expand your thinking beyond the traditional school/church/firehouse precinct voting sites to shopping centers, car dealerships, fairgrounds, hotels, and other spots. Find locations with plenty of space for equipment, workers, and voters. Look for places with large parking lots, ample parking spaces for voters with disabilities, and proximity to bus routes.

Dana DeBeauvoir observed, "So, maybe the world turns into more of a mapping exercise in the sense of bus stops and public transport routes and calculation of how far each voter has to drive, rather than boundary lines that make no sense to anyone. It takes the politics out of at least where people go vote. We can't remove politics from representation, but we can remove it from participation."

### Outsmart long lines.

The convenience benefit is lost if vote centers are too few and far between. "The most important thing is to remember the voting public," Jo Ann Stewart commented. "We started this to make it convenient for them, increase voter turnout. You don't want, for the sake of saving a few dollars, not to have enough locations to properly serve your



public.” Indiana prescribes a minimum 10-mile radius from any residence to a vote center location.

Many counties look to Early Voting to keep the crowds lighter on Election Day. Additionally, observing peak volume patterns during Early Voting can help in predicting high-traffic times and locations on the big day and providing plenty of poll workers, equipment, and ballots to handle any surges.

Travis County, with its precinct-mirroring vote center locations, instructs voters, “If you see a ‘Vote Here’ sign, you can vote here. But try to vote in your neighborhood.” This helps prevent surprises on Election Day. For the 2012 presidential election, the County plans to try something new—using social media to alert the public to any heavy volume at a given polling place and to let them know which locations can provide “breeze-in/breeze-out” service.

#### **Foster buy-in from stakeholders.**

As you plan a vote center program, it is advisable to bring your stakeholders to the table. For example, Travis County engaged a citizen study group to gauge public response to the vote center concept.

Lubbock County brought together the city secretaries, school superintendents, minority groups such as NAACP and ACLU, and advocates for voters with disabilities. Kennedy said, “We gave folks a map that showed possible polling places, distributed push pins, and said, ‘you tell us where you want these vote

centers to be.’” The County also brought in a consultant from a public relations firm to get the word out to voters in the community. By preventing voter disenfranchisement through this measure, the County ensured sign-off by the Department of Justice.

Voter education is an essential element of vote center success, especially when you first launch the program. Jo Ann Stewart described her county’s efforts, saying, “We were very fortunate that our local media, TV, radio, newspaper gave us coverage the whole month before our first vote center election. Candidates would take flyers and hand them out to the voting public.” Don’t forget to include county officials and poll workers in the education process. It may be necessary to add a line item to your budget for stakeholder education as you get your program off the ground.

#### **Consider conducting a mock election.**

If you run a mock election, you can make sure everything is programmed, working, and structured as it needs to be. Dorothy Kennedy said, “Our contact at Hart came out and did a full mock election including setup, producing and printing ballots, testing them, voting the ballots on the machines, and bringing the total in. We conducted a total turnkey mock election with the vote center concept in mind. As we went through the steps, we documented all of the procedures and noted the changes the Secretary of State office would need to approve for us. Hart was instrumental in helping us see what changes needed to be made. We had

them onsite with us as we set up the vote centers, through part of the training period, on Election Day, and the day after.”

Kennedy continued, “Do not ever forget your vendor when you are deciding you want to go the vote center route. The mock election is huge. You need your vendor to work through that with you.”

#### **Use the right tools for the job.**

Because vote centers typically operate at a larger capacity than their precinct-based counterparts, it is important that your voting equipment supports streamlined operations for the election. Hart offers an integrated solution that covers requirements for scanning paper ballots (eScan), recording votes electronically (eSlate), providing accessibility to voters with disabilities (eSlate DAU), and checking in voters in an automated manner that prevents them from voting at another center and streamlines the ballot provision process (ePollBook).

Seamless integration between the voter registration system and the voting system is crucial when issuing ballots at the vote center. Whereas poll workers usually have access to only one ballot style in a traditional precinct-based polling place, vote centers introduce the risk of poll workers issuing the wrong ballot, because every ballot style must be available at every vote center. Hart’s ePollBook, integrated with our eSlate direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machine, eliminates this risk by automating ballot selection. The poll worker checks the voter in using the ePollBook, which prints a bar code. Another poll worker scans

the bar code, and the resulting access code brings up the correct ballot on the DRE. This integration eliminates the human error poll workers commonly make when they must choose from among many ballot styles for each voter.

Jo Ann Stewart said, “We are very happy with the Hart equipment. It has worked out well with the vote center concept. The voters like it very well. This equipment is extremely durable, and we are able to secure it more easily. We have early voting for a week before Election Day, and with the Hart equipment, we can ensure those votes would still be counted in the event of any vandalism, fire, or other disaster. We would not have to call people back to vote again. That is a nightmare I don’t want to contemplate.”

Beth Liming added, “I can’t say enough about the help desk, the support you get when you call in. When I call them now, I don’t need to say where I am from; I just give my first name and they recognize me. Last year, during primaries, we hadn’t needed to call in for seemingly ages—they finally called us to ask if we were still alive. I said ‘yes, everything is working great!’”

## Making the Leap

### Top Recommendations For Vote Center Success

Learn from those who've gone before

Be picky about locations

Outsmart long lines

Foster buy-in from stakeholders

Consider conducting a mock election

Use the right tools for the job

The benefits of adopting vote centers—voter convenience, increased voter turnout, enhanced control and flexibility in elections administration, potential cost savings—make vote centers an approach worth considering. A successful shift from precinct-based voting requires careful planning and preparation. How many vote center locations are required for a particular election? What sites will best serve the voting public? Is the correct equipment in place to ensure that voter check-in data is centralized, the correct ballots are issued, the votes are accurately counted, and the voting process is accessible to all legally registered voters?

Counties that are leaning toward making the leap have access to a considerable number of resources to help do their homework. Veteran vote center counties are enthusiastic about sharing what they have learned in implementing their own programs. Vote center experts at Hart InterCivic can provide state-specific guidance as well as a national perspective. Contact us today!

## Vote Center Solutions



The Hart ePollBook is the secure, easy and reliable way for poll workers to quickly locate and accurately update a voter's record during Early Voting and on Election Day. ePollBook provides a digital database of registered voters that frees voters from limitations to specific polling places making it the perfect fit for your Vote Center solution.



The eSlate provides all necessary ballot styles at the polling place making it an ideal solution for Early Voting and Vote Centers. Multiple eSlates can be deployed in an integrated configuration for efficient, high-throughput voting in large cities and other metropolitan areas with large numbers of voters.



The eScan provides a paper solution that integrates results with the HAVA compliant eSlate making it an ideal solution for Early Voting and Vote Centers.



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