



Vote Centers Come of Age

Election Day vote centers are an alternative to the traditional, neighborhood-based precinct system. They allow voters to cast their ballots at any polling place in the jurisdiction, regardless of their residential address. Hence, Colorado's slogan, "With Vote Centers, there is no wrong place to vote!"

Election Day vote centers were first tried in 2003; now, less than a decade later, many states are embracing the concept. In the world of election policy, that's lightning-fast acceptance. Why are they suddenly so popular? Because they offer these advantages: "convenience, convenience, convenience," says Senator Ron Alting of Indiana, who sponsored successful legislation this year to permit all Indiana counties to use vote centers. Besides convenience, he adds that "for local government, it's beautiful because it offers them huge savings."

Scott Doyle, county clerk in Larimer County, Colo., came up with the idea, and the term. The inspiration came in 2000, when legally registered voters in his jurisdiction were barred by police at the courthouse door from voting after 7 p.m. These voters had first showed up at the wrong precinct, and were directed to the courthouse as a last recourse. But they couldn't make it through the door on time. Doyle thought, "There's got to be a better way."

The better way was to allow registered voters in the county to vote at any designated vote center, not just their precinct's location. The centers would be strategically placed

throughout the county near heavily trafficked areas. Doyle, on behalf of the Colorado County Clerks Association, went to the legislature, explained the new concept, and got the innovation passed in 2002. And in 2003 the inaugural 31 vote centers replaced the traditional 143 precincts in Larimer County. Among voters, his idea was met with some skepticism: What could be a more beloved American tradition than casting one's vote with neighbors? Initial objections, however, were short-lived.

By most accounts, the new system worked. Voters didn't need to know their precinct location; fewer poll workers (and thus fewer dollars) were required; and no one was turned away and sent to the courthouse. That was key for Doyle because his whole motivation was to make it easier for more voters to vote.

After nine years of experience with vote centers under his belt, what are Doyle's impressions now? For Election Day voting, vote centers are still his favorite way to go, and he's ready and willing to advise other states about how to adopt them. But he's also become an advocate for an all-mail system, something Colorado does not permit for general elections. He says that if he could make the change to all mail, he could "return \$1 million to his commissioners."

What about the rest of the country? After Colorado, Indiana was the next to try vote centers, with a five-county pilot project, including Senator Alting's Tippecanoe County. "It's been a huge success," Alting says. This year's bill to

continued on page 2



can•vass (n.)

Compilation of election returns and validation of the outcome that forms the basis of the official results by a political subdivision.

—U.S. Election Assistance Commission:
Glossary of Key Election Terminology

In This Issue

Vote Centers Come of Age	1
Pre-Election Day Voting—More Options, Shorter Time Frames	3
Variations in Voter ID Legislation	4
Worth Noting	4
From NCSL's Election Team	4

permit all Indiana counties to use vote centers was supported by both political parties in the five pilot counties. “Vote centers are an absolute no-brainer,” he says. “We had unanimous support with Democrats and Republicans in those counties. It was somewhat of a shock to the General Assembly that something could be so good on both sides.”

He added that while he sponsored a variety of highly visible bills this year, including one prohibiting the synthetic drugs known as “Spice” and “Bath Salts,” it was vote centers that grabbed his constituents’ attention. “No other topic was as popular. Everybody grabbed me, saying, ‘don’t you let them take our vote centers away.’” In addition to Colorado and Indiana, South Dakota, North Dakota, Tennessee and Texas have also run pilot vote center projects.

Six states have enacted legislation this year to permit (but not require) vote centers. Indiana, Tennessee and Texas are moving beyond their pilot projects, and Arizona, New Mexico and Utah are initiating vote centers. The details vary (how many centers and what voter education are required), but the goals are much the same: Save money and offer voters convenience.


But Maricopa County, Ariz., home to more than half the state’s population, has signaled it will not use vote centers. The issue is cost. Maricopa’s current voting equipment does not support the numerous kinds of ballots required, and buying new equipment is not an option.

Vote centers may not be workable in every locale. For them to work, jurisdictions may want to consider whether they are prepared to provide:

- The appropriate ballot for each voter’s address, either by using print-on-demand systems, electronic voting equipment that can be re-set for each voter, or a sufficient supply all the different paper ballots that may be required.
- Electronic poll books that allow poll workers to look up a voter’s registration, get the proper ballot, and enter data. Poll books must be networked to prevent voters from casting multiple ballots.
- Voter education that informs voters thoroughly of all the changes involved with vote centers. Mindy Moretti of the Pew Center on the States says “it’s the educational learning curve for your voters that matters. Without it, the first time can be a disaster.” She points to Colorado’s 2006 experience, when voters in some counties faced long waits. She says that voters need to know that they won’t be voting at the usual school or church, and administrators need to have sufficient voting equipment available to accommodate expected turnout.

In addition to greater convenience, political scientist Robert Stein from Rice University says his research has shown that centers increase voter turnout. “Of all the election reforms that have been adopted, this is the only one anybody’s been able to find that has an effect on turnout and cost,” he says.

As for costs, the Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute did a county-by-county economic analysis of vote centers. Compared with precinct voting, on a per-vote basis, vote centers are expected to be cheaper by 29 percent to 54 percent, depending on the county. The District of Columbia considered using 16 vote centers for a citywide special election in April instead of 143 precincts to save what was calculated to be more than \$200,000. The city board, however, opted to continue using precincts, fearing potential disenfranchisement.

Are vote centers right for your state? The offices of the Indiana secretary of state and Larimer County clerk both provide lots of information on their Web pages. For an anti-vote center perspective, try the North Carolina Coalition for Verified Voting. See NCSL’s Vote Center webpage for more information. 

States That Permit the Use of Vote Centers

Arizona
Colorado
Indiana
New Mexico
North Dakota
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah

Note: In these states, local election officials are permitted by state law to use vote centers in place of precinct polling places.

One Big Number: 768,211

That’s the number of voter registration forms received by states over the Internet in 2010. This is 1.69 percent of all forms received, up from 1.1 percent in 2008, according to the Voter Registration Report for 2008 through 2010, just released by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. For more, see NCSL’s Electronic Voter Registration page.

Variations in Voter ID Legislation

In January, The Canvass named 2011 “The Year of Voter Identification Legislation.” And so it has been. Thirty-four states considered such legislation, leading to seven enactments and five vetoes so far. In virtually all this legislation, a strict requirement for a photo ID has been included (instead of lesser requirements that might permit voter verification by non-photo IDs or affidavits), along with a requirement to provide ID cards at no cost to voters who need them. The laws are not all the same, however. Here’s a look at some of the differences. For more details, see NCSL’s Voter Identification Web page. [🔗](#)

Acceptable ID and Other Provisions of State Laws

(Acceptable ID in all states includes a driver’s license or ID card from that state and a passport; other acceptable IDs are listed here.)


State	Other Acceptable ID (must have photo)	Significant Provisions
Alabama (Takes effect after pre-clearance from the Department of Justice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military ID • Tribal ID • Student or Employee ID • Driver’s licenses from other states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirement is waived if the voter is identified by two election officials as an eligible voter on the poll list, and both election workers sign a sworn affidavit so stating
Kansas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concealed carry handgun license • Student ID from a Kansas college or university • Government employee badge • Government public assistance ID • An expired ID for those 65 or older 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proof of citizenship will be required beginning in 2013 • Applicants must prove registered voter status to receive a free ID • Absentee ballot applications must include a driver’s license, ID card number, or a photocopy of any other of the acceptable forms of ID
Rhode Island	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military ID • IDs issued by a U.S. educational institution • Government-issued medical card with photo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Until 2014 non-photo ID will be accepted, such as birth certificates and Social Security cards
South Carolina (Takes effect after pre-clearance from the Department of Justice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current military ID • Current SC voter registration card 	<p>Requirement is waived if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voter signs an affidavit stating a religious objection to being photographed • There is a “reasonable impediment that prevents elector from obtaining photo ID”
Tennessee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driver’s licenses from other states • Photo employee ID card issued by any state or the federal government • Valid U.S. military ID 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not apply to full-time residents of nursing homes, the indigent, those unable to obtain underlying identification without paying a fee or those with a religious objection to being photographed
Texas (takes effect after pre-clearance from the Department of Justice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ID that is not more than 60 days past expiration • U.S. citizenship certificate • A concealed carry handgun license 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not apply to people with documented disabilities who do not have appropriate ID
Wisconsin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cards issued by federally recognized Indian tribes • Certificates of naturalization issued not more than two years before the election • Student ID with expiration date • Military ID 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absentee ballot applicants are also required to show ID, but nursing home residents are exempted; the law allows for future establishment of REAL ID requirements

Pre-Election Day Voting—More Options, Shorter Time Frames

Over the last generation, many states have offered more and more opportunities for citizens to vote before Election Day. These include in-person early voting (currently 32 states plus the District of Columbia), no-excuse absentee voting (27 states plus the District of Columbia), and all-mail voting (Oregon and Washington).

This year, however, the trend has gone the other way. Seven states—Florida, Georgia, Maine, Ohio, Tennessee, West Virginia and Wisconsin—have shortened in-person, early voting time frames. The move may be based on administrative concerns (is it really necessary to have six weeks to

cast your ballot?), fiscal realities (the longer in-person early voting centers are open, the longer staff need to be paid to run them), or perhaps political motivations.


NCSL elections expert Jennie Bowser says “offering voters convenience through an extended early voting period comes at a high cost, and it may well be the continuing poor economy that’s driving states to cut back on early voting periods.” Current state-by-state information on all early voting options are covered in NCSL’s Absentee and Early Voting. 

Worth

- Rock the Vote, an advocacy group that supports easier access to the polls for young people, has produced a national Voting System Scorecard and report on the ease of voter registration, voter ID requirements, civics class requirements, and more. Legislators might like to see where their states stand in the eyes of this group.

Noting

- MIT political scientist Charles Stewart III has just published a literature review, “Voting Technologies,” in the 2011 Annual Review of Political Science. In it, he answers these questions, among others: How do voting machines affect voter choices? What impact do these technologies have on down-ballot races? Why do jurisdictions have the technologies they have? To that last question, the answer is most commonly based on “a legacy of past decisions.” For answers to the others, you must read the review.

- This year, Maine ended its “same day registration,” dropping the number of states that permit voters to register and vote on the same day from eight to seven. That may not be the end of the story; a drive began in July to put a referendum on the ballot that would restore same day registration.
- The U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration held a hearing in June to fill U.S. Election Assistance Commission seats. Nominees were Tom Hicks, from the House Committee on Administration; Gineen Bresso, currently a commissioner whose term is expiring; and Myrna Perez, senior counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice. Confirmation votes are not yet scheduled.
- South Carolina’s newspaper, The State, describes two medical doctors who have spent years helping patients register to vote, and are now helping get birth certificates for those who need them so they can get a photo ID to vote under the state’s new requirements.
- Last month the Heritage Foundation and the Military Voter Protection Project released a report, A President’s Opportunity: Making Military Voters A Priority. Authors M. Eric Eversole and Hans von Spakovsky analyze the implementation of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (MOVE Act) and make recommendations on what still needs to be done to ensure that citizens in the military are able to vote. 

From NCSL’s Election Team

It’s August, and that means it’s time for the Legislative Summit in San Antonio, August 8-11. We are hosting elections sessions on:

- MOVE Act Compliance
- Getting Voter Registration Right
- Can States Stage More Efficient Elections?

There will be several redistricting sessions to choose from as well. If you are joining us, please let us know. We’d love to meet our Canvass readers, and do some quick interviews with you on your state’s efforts to run great elections. Please e-mail us or call us at (303) 364-7700.

*From Jennie Bowser, Tim Storey,
Wendy Underhill and Susan Frederick*



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William T. Pound, Executive Director
7700 East First Place
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(303) 364-7700
(303) 364-7800
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To subscribe, contact TheCanvass@ncsl.org

NCSL Elections Staff
Jennie Drage Bowser, Susan Parnas Frederick, Tim Storey and Wendy Underhill
Layout and design: Leann Stelzer