

Full Service Voting: Optimizing the Voter Experience



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voter participation in the United States is plummeting.ⁱ In California, there is a widening gap between the number eligible voters and the number of voters who successfully cast a ballot. During the 2014 midterm elections, California set a record low for voter turnout in a regularly scheduled general election; only 42.2 percent of registered voters.ⁱⁱ

In an effort to address waning civic participation, some states have adopted modern technology and procedures that make the voting process more streamlined and accessible to a wider audience of



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voters. In January 2014 the Presidential Commission on Election Administration (PCEA) released a report with a series of recommendations and best practices to improve the voting experience for voters and election administrators alike.ⁱⁱⁱ The Commission made recommendations for states and individual jurisdictions to modernize voter registration, expand access to the polls, optimize poll place management, and update voting technology. This report looks at one model, as implemented in Colorado, that incorporated many of the PCEA's recommendations and has become a national standard for more streamlined and accessible voter registration and voting.

How does Colorado administer elections?

Colorado's method of voting is the direct result of sweeping legislation enacted in 2013 with bipartisan support. HB 1303, the "Voter Access and Modernized Elections Act"^v established a voting system based on three elements: **same-day registration**, required that every registered voter is **mailed a ballot**, and mandated that counties provide **drop boxes and vote centers** on days leading up to and on Election Day. Under current Colorado election law, vote centers (called Voter Service and Polling Centers) serve as full service voting locations where any voter from the county can register to vote, update their registration, or vote a regular, provisional, or replacement ballot privately and independently.

Methodology

This report is based on a literature review of dozens of publications analyzing alternative voting methods and a series of in-depth interviews with six county clerks, the Secretary of State's Director of Elections, and four election advocates, all from Colorado. (A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix A.) In an effort to focus the research, we examined three primary reforms: vote by mail, vote centers, and early voting.

Hillary Hall, Boulder County's County Clerk

"because of where we were headed before we implemented the model, our resources now are aligned with how people actually were voting. In our 2012 presidential election, 85% of the people who voted in that election, voted with a mail ballot. Either mailing it or dropping it off, or getting a replacement ballot and voting that ballot. 15% voted in person."

Recommendations

There are five main recommendations that surfaced from our interviews.

- 1 Consider a phased-in approach to implementation.** One of the primary reasons that Colorado's modernization reforms were so successful was because most voters were already used to receiving and casting their ballot by mail. California counties that already have a high percentage of voters requesting vote by mail ballots or already mail ballots to all voters are in a prime position to convert to a Colorado-style system. California may want to consider a hybrid approach for counties with low vote by mail usage rates that allows a transition period for voters who currently vote in person.



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2 **Open more drop-off locations for voters who want the option to deposit their ballots in a secure receptacle, especially 24-hour and drive-up options.** Even as more voters started to register as permanent vote by mail voters in Colorado, there was, “a desire for a lot of the mail ballot voters that were requesting mail ballots to drop their ballot off in person instead of using the mail stream.”

Hillary Hall, Boulder County Clerk

“We get 75% - 80% of our in person voters on that Monday or Tuesday [the day before and Election day].”

3 **Focus early voting resources on the four days before Election Day.** County clerks and advocates agreed that people either cast their ballot as soon as they get their mail ballot or they wait until the last minute. Even though Colorado has two full weeks of early voting at vote centers that must be open at least four hours per day, “the turnout is dismal during that first week and starts to pick up that second week, but you really do not get the vast majority of voters until the very end,” said Elena Nunez, Executive Director of Colorado Common Cause.

Elena Nunez, Executive Director of Colorado Common Cause

“The counties that we’ve seen do it most effectively are the ones who plan for significant demand rather than low turnout.”

4 **Jurisdictions with low vote by mail usage should build in capacity to manage voters who prefer to vote in person at vote centers.** While most counties in Colorado have voters preferring to mail or drop their ballots off at specified locations, there are still some populations that prefer to vote in person at vote centers. Counties need to plan for vote centers with enough space to accommodate high volumes of traffic, like college campuses which have large number of new voters. Counties should consider planning for locations where there is a need a greater number of translators, voting machines, accommodations for voters with disabilities, and more booths to accommodate new voters.

Judd Coate, the Director of the Division of Election in Colorado Secretary of State’s office

We would get the “occasional frustrated voters who would say ‘you mailed me my ballot in the last election but now you’re not mailing it to me in this election, what gives? There was a general sense of confusion on the part of voters about when they would receive a ballot by mail and when they needed to show up in person to their assigned polling location.”

5 **Invest in voter education and outreach. Over time, move to standardized election administration rules that all counties operate under regarding ballot delivery with vote centers, same day registration, and early voting.** In the early years when some counties have adopted the new system and others have not, consideration in planning



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should be given to how to educate the public and media. In Colorado's initial years of implementation, there was significant voter confusion that could be ameliorated with greater voter education and benefited ultimately from statewide standardization of election practices. The election officials interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the standardization to Colorado's elections that occurred as a result of HB 1303.

In 2015, Denver “saw 71% drop-off in person at one of the three ways, either 24-hour box, drive up, or at a vote center and then only 29% chose to use the mail.... In person voting is the smallest. If people can drop it off at either 24-hour box or drive up, they are unlikely to get out of their car and walk into a vote center.”

Conclusion

California's declining voter turnout is cause for concern, warranting significant and immediate action. In order to reduce the more than 40% of registered voters who do not currently vote because of process, time, or scheduling constraints, state legislators should look to Colorado as an example of how to modernize elections and improve the voting experience for all.ⁱⁱⁱ According to a recent survey of registered voters in Colorado, 95% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall voting experience in 2014.^{iv} Anecdotally, the majority of county election officials agree that overall turnout of registered voters has increased as a result of HB 1303.

As California considers whether to adopt similar voting approaches (Senate Bill 450 proposes an option for county election officials to offer vote centers as places for voting and registration, mail a ballot to every voter, and provide ballot drop-off locations), we should keep in mind these primary goals: to improve voter participation and options and reduce voter confusion and allowing counties to modernize their election processes while saving money over the long run. Taking the lessons learned from Colorado's experience will help California achieve all these goals.

ⁱ “Voter turnout in 2014 was the lowest since WWII,” Jose A. DelReal, The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/11/10/voter-turnout-in-2014-was-the-lowest-since-wwii/>

ⁱⁱ “Voter Participation in California,” PPIC: http://www.ppic.org/main/publication_show.asp?i=1161

ⁱⁱⁱ “American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration,” PCEA: <https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf>

^{iv} 2014 Pew Colorado Midterm Election Survey. <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/CVAMEC/files/2015/2014PewColoradoMidtermElectionSurvey.pptx>.

