Thinking Outside the Ballot Box:
Innovations for the Polling Place

I n 2004, more than 40,000 residents of Clark County, Nevada cast their ballots before Election Day in a popular shopping center.

Larimer County, Colorado, replaced its 143 polling places with 31 full–service "vote centers" where anyone in the county can vote.

The "Express Check-in" procedure in Seminole County, Florida eliminates the use of paper poll books and makes voting faster by connecting polling places to the voter registration database.

Across the country, elections officials are changing the way Americans vote. Some of the changes—such as early voting and the use of vote centers—are dramatic and obvious. Others are more subtle, involving new technologies and changes in the procedures used to get voters in and out of the polling place.

The common denominator linking many of the changes: convenience. Reports of long lines and widespread confusion at polling places in recent elections have forced elections officials to take a fresh look at how they do their work, while drawing attention to innovative approaches and new ideas.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20 percent of registered voters who did not vote in the November 2004 election said it was because they were too busy or had conflicting work or school schedules. By bringing added convenience to the voting process, elections officials hope to boost participation among these voters while making voting less of a hassle for one and all.

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

The new mantra in election administration is customer service. But it is not just the customers (i.e., the voters) who benefit. Elections officials are embracing approaches that make their own jobs easier—for example, by reducing Election Day lines and by equipping poll workers with the technologies they need to solve problems on their own.

In this report, we take a closer look at several innovations that local and state elections officials are adopting to put the "service" back in "voter service." It is the League's hope that these stories lead to further experimentation and more new thinking at all levels about how to make elections work better for the American voter.

VOTE CENTERS

I n some jurisdictions, voters no longer have to go to a specific polling place to cast their ballots on Election Day. Instead, they can visit any of a number of "vote centers." Larimer County, Colorado has replaced all of its 143 polling places with 31 vote centers, while Boone County, Missouri is using what it calls "central polls," in addition to its regular polling places. Proponents of vote centers say they offer voters added convenience – for example, by allowing them to vote at a location near their work or their children's school. Elections officials also have been drawn to the concept by the promise of increased efficiency – fewer voting sites, as well as reduced numbers of poll workers and provisional ballots. Concerns have been voiced, however, about the potential for long lines and whether vote centers really are more convenient for voters with limited transportation options.

On the evening of November 7, 2000, hundreds of Larimer County, Colorado voters lined up inside the county courthouse in Fort Collins. Turned away from other polling places 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 ballots in the hotly contested 2000 presidential election, as well as state and local races.

By the end of the day, however, there was still a line of frustrated people in the courthouse. And, as the polls closed, 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 Scott Doyle. "There's no way around it: they were disenfranchised."

The fate of those disenfranchised voters has been an inspiration for Doyle as he has worked to change the way people vote in Larimer County. Elected as the county's clerk and recorder in 2003, Doyle has used Larimer County's experience in 2000 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.

Referred to by a variety of names, vote centers have been embraced by a number of states and localities across the country as a potential antidote to Election Day

confusion, long lines and other problems. In addition to Larimer County, another local jurisdiction that has enthusiastically embraced the approach (and can talk about early results) is Boone County, Missouri.

LARIMER COUNTY, COLORADO

Located in north central Colorado, Larimer County has a population of 283,000. The county extends from the city of Fort Collins in the east to Rocky Mountain National Park and the continental divide in the west. Covering 2,640 square miles, it includes urban and suburban areas, a major university (Colorado State), rural farming areas and ranchland, and mountain communities.

Upon becoming the county's clerk and recorder in 2003, Doyle was resolved to take a fresh look at alternative approaches to administering elections.

Among the major changes in society that conflict with voting-as-usual, Doyle explained, is the increasing mobility of Americans – and the need for people to re-register to vote every time they move. "Especially in a university community such as Fort Collins with so many people coming and going, you are just inviting trouble," he said.

The desire to make voting more efficient and trouble-free was not the only motivation behind Larimer County's

embrace of vote centers. The county also was spurred to action by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA).

Passed in the wake of widespread voting problems across the country in 2000, HAVA would have required the county to make substantial investments in improving the accessibility of its 143 polling places (in many cases, replacing non-accessible polling places with other locations). Going to a more limited number of vote centers, in Doyle's view, was the more cost-effective option.

HOW IT WORKS

Larimer County conducted a test run of the vote center concept in local elections in 2003. Then, after Colorado legislators passed a bill allowing vote centers to be used in general elections, the county set up 31 of the locations for the 2004 presidential election and launched a wide-ranging public education campaign. The message: Voters could show up at any vote center in the county, cast the proper ballot and expect to have it counted, whether they had moved recently within the county or not.

Locations. Vote center locations include municipal facilities, county buildings, large churches, hotels and storefronts. The basic requirements, according to Doyle, are a room of 3,000 square feet or more, 80 parking spaces with up-close parking for people with disabilities, Internet connectivity, and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Staffing. Each vote center is staffed by greeters, provisional judges (who assist voters arriving with no identification), computer judges (who process the voters), and ballot judges. In addition, Larimer County has standby judges called "road runners" who are available to drive to any vote center to troubleshoot computers, bring more ballots and respond to other problems that arise during the day. All election judges (as election workers are called in Colorado) receive five to six hours of training, including two to three hours focused on their specific assignments at the vote center.

Technology. Larimer County uses an electronic poll book system so that all vote centers are connected to the county courthouse. With temporary T-1 lines set up at each vote center, judges are able to transmit real-time data, including changes of address, and update the system when a voter receives a ballot so that the voter will not be able to vote again somewhere else. To cut costs, vote centers are equipped with computers that are due to be recycled out of county offices. Larimer County uses an optical scan ballot.

"An Integrated Approach." Vote centers are part of what Doyle points to as "an integrated approach to voting" in Larimer County that includes early voting and absentee voting as well. Early voting begins at designated sites in the county 15 days before the general election, and Colorado also permits "no-excuse" absentee balloting by mail. In the 2004 election, one-third of voters in the county voted early, one-third voted absentee, and the remaining one-third cast their ballots at the vote centers on Election Day.

2004 RESULTS

In the 2004 general election, 94.6 percent of active registered voters in Larimer County cast their ballots. An analysis by Professor Robert M. Stein of Rice University indicated that the use of vote centers in Larimer County in 2004 led to a higher level of voter turnout when compared both to previous elections in the county, and to neighboring counties that did not use vote 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 as well, providing a number of administrative advantages over traditional, precinct-based voting. For example, where it would have taken 1,000 judges to staff 143 polling places in the county in 2004, the 31 vote centers required just 500 judges. In addition, by allowing county residents to vote anywhere, vote centers reduced the number of provisional ballots that had to be issued to voters whose status could not be verified at the polling place.

Of course, Larimer County is helped in a big way by the fact that as many as two-thirds of county voters cast their ballots before Election Day in 2004, taking a great deal of pressure off of the vote centers. Without the use of early and absentee voting, Doyle remarked, vote centers might not be as effective an option for the county.

"The logistics begin to put you over the edge," he said of the prospect of having to handle larger numbers of voters on Election Day. Larimer County's experience, he added, shows that vote centers are "not the only answer." But, in combination with other strategies, vote centers can yield "real improvements" for voters and election administrators alike, Doyle said.

BOONE COUNTY, MISSOURI

It is probably not a coincidence that two of the early adopters of vote centers are university towns. Just as Larimer County has Colorado State University, Boone County, Missouri, 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 places to direct students and other voters who are uncertain about where they should vote. Unlike Larimer County, Boone County uses central polls in addition 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 voters who are new to the county or who have changed their address. According to Noren, sixty percent of local residents move between elections. 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 traditional polling places. The central polls were located on and around the University of Missouri campus, as well as in areas of the county with high rates of mobility. Of 76,000 Boone County voters who cast their ballots that year, 5 percent used the central polls.

Central polls were advertised by the county in advance of the election as the go-to place for voters who were unsure of their proper polling place or voting status. In addition, voters who showed up at the wrong polling place on Election Day were given the choice of going to their regular polling place or to one of the central polls, where they could apply to change their address on the spot.

In all, 5 percent of Boone County voters filed with the county to change their addresses on Election Day; 1,500 did this at the polls, while another 1,500 called the county elections office and 500 changed their addresses online.

In years past, Noren said, the county was "inundated" on Election Day with people calling to change their addresses. The county phone system did not have the capacity to handle the surge of calls, and many voters couldn't get through. In 2004, by contrast, the process was "as smooth as can be," Noren said, citing the positive testimony of both the political parties and international observers.

In addition to helping individual voters, Boone County's central polls have proven a valuable resource for the political parties and other interest groups involved in get-out-the-vote campaigns on Election Day. "If the parties have a voter and they don't know where that person should go, they can take them to one of these places," Noren explained.

Noren said central polls have worked in concert with other practices to streamline the voting process in Boone County. Chief among these other strategies is the county's increasing reliance on its Web site to allow people to look up their voter information and apply to change their addresses online; the Web site also provides maps and polling place information.

"Our Internet site is absolutely vital to us," Noren said. It is also vital, she added, to the political parties and groups such as the League of Women Voters, who now can access the county's Web site and refer voters to their proper polling places without having to send people to the county or call Noren's office directly.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Noren said one of the most important factors in the success or failure of central polls is their location. Predictably, the most heavily trafficked of Boone County's central poll locations in 2004 was the one 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.

By contrast, other central poll locations did not get much traffic at all, even though they were located in what Noren characterized as "high-turnout locations." One explanation for the low use of central polls in certain locations may have been the county's focus in its communications on central polls as places for resolving problems.

"People may not have gotten the message that they can go to these places even if they don't have problems and simply want another option that may be more convenient," Noren added.

Noren also said that many Boone County residents appear comfortable with their traditional polling places and don't want to go anywhere else. At the same time, she said she now views central polls as a key component of Boone County's election system.

Among the key challenges associated with running central polls, according to Noren, is training. The commu-

nication system linking Boone County's central polls and other polling places relies in part on text messages sent to pagers and cell phones. (For example, when a voter changes his or her address at a central poll, the other polling places are notified by text message, including the voter's old polling place.) Noren said she has trained high school students to handle the bulk of the Election Day communications among polling places but that the training costs could easily prove prohibitive.

"I spend all this money training these kids and they're great, but I can only use them in one election (because they go on to college)," she said.

Despite some of the drawbacks, Noren said central polls have been "a real plus" for Boone County.

"I can't imagine going back and not having these places where people can go if they have a problem," she said. She added that she hopes to expand the use of central polls not just for problem-solving purposes but as a way to bring added convenience to voting in Boone County.

EARLY VOTING

Seeking to reduce Election Day lines and offer added convenience for voters, many states and counties are allowing people to cast their ballots at a limited number of polling places during a defined "early voting" period (usually about two weeks before the election). In many counties, early voting now attracts 50 percent or more of voters, who clearly appreciate the opportunity to go to the polls on a day that is convenient for them. While elections officials generally welcome early voting, it does create new administra– tive challenges, including the need to find suitable locations that can accommodate voting equipment, poll workers, and voters, as well as candidates trolling for support.

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, Nevada, 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 by casting their ballots at the Galleria.

In all, 271,000 people voted early in fast-growing Clark County in 2004; the total represents half of all voters in the county, which includes Las Vegas. Early voting starts 17 days before Election Day and runs for two weeks, ending the Friday before the election.

"It 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 who are taking advantage of new opportunities to avoid the Election Day rush by casting their ballots early.

CLARK COUNTY, NEVADA

In addition to the Galleria, Clark County had seven other "permanent" early voting sites in 2004—mostly major shopping centers where the county placed 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 early 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, Lomax said, the percentage of county 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, he refers to early voters as "happy voters." "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 said.

The county's permanent early voting sites are open during mall hours – generally, from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. At the mobile sites, the hours vary depending on the location.

Both the mobile and the permanent sites are connected to the voter registration database via an electronic poll book system. Voters check in by having poll workers scan their sample ballots (which they receive in the mail) or simply providing their names. After validating their signa- tures, voters proceed to vote on direct recording electronic (DRE) voting machines, which select the right ballot for each person. At night, election workers pull cartridges from the machines and drive them to the county's tabula- tion center to download the day's results.

FINDING THE RIGHT SITES

Lomax characterized Clark County's early voting program as "an unqualified success." However, administering the program is not without its challenges. Chief among these is finding suitable locations for early voting. Until now, the county has not had to pay to set up an early voting site, Lomax said. However, as the available floor space in the area's shopping malls has filled up with increasing numbers of kiosk-type stores, mall owners have grown more hesitant in their dealings 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.

The challenge is not limited to the big shopping malls. Even in smaller community grocery stores where the county sets up its mobile sites, Lomax is finding it harder to secure space for early voting. In addition to concerns about lost floor space, store owners increasingly express a fear of litigation connected with the use of their properties for voting.

"We get turned down a lot," Lomax said, adding that elections officials have to keep pushing and talking their way in.

One result of the pushback from stores and malls is that the county is using more mobile trailers as voting sites. The trailers can be parked in shopping center parking lots during the early voting period. In 2004, for example, 16,000 people voted in a double-wide trailer at Centennial Center, a Las Vegas shopping complex.

Despite the county's increasing use of trailers, Lomax said he still prefers putting the polls inside stores and malls. "Nothing beats going to people where they are," he said.

Another challenge facing the county as it seeks to expand early voting is communications. "This is such a transient community with so many newcomers that we have a hard time getting the word out that this is available," Lomax said.

Some critics of early voting have suggested that it might make voting too easy – i.e., that elections officials are reaching voters who are not prepared to vote. Lomax says that's not the case. The majority of voters showing up at the county's early voting sites arrive with their sample ballots in hand, he noted. "They are prepared and have come with the intention of voting."

Lomax added that the rapid growth of Clark County, which is currently the 15th largest county in the nation, has enabled it to "grow into" early voting. "As the county grows, I have been able to absorb that growth by expanding the number of people who vote early," he said.

If Clark County did not have early voting, Lomax estimated that it would have to purchase 2,700 new voting machines to handle the added traffic on Election Day. In all, he said the county has saved $8 million through early voting.

TEXAS

Texas legislators passed the Lone Star State's first early voting law in 1987. Today, voters in every county in the state can cast their ballots starting 17 days before Election Day. In more populous counties, elections officials are required to open at least one early voting site in every state legislative district, which can number 26 in the largest counties. Smaller counties must have a minimum of one early voting site at the county courthouse.

Ann McGeehan, director of elections in the Texas Secretary of State's office, said 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. In 2004, for the first time ever, more Texans voted early (including early and absentee voting) than voted on Election Day.

In addition to defining the length of the early voting period and the minimum number of sites in each county, Texas legislators established a number of other requirements. For example, all early voting sites must be open during "regular business hours" and early voting sites in populous urban areas must be open 12 hours daily during the final week of early voting. In less populous areas, voters may petition the county for expanded hours – and, in many places, voters have done just that, according to McGeehan.

ONE COUNTY'S EXPERIENCE

One county that has gone above and beyond the minimum standards defined by the state is Travis County, home of the Texas capital of Austin. Dana DeBeauvoir, the county clerk, said Travis County voters could choose from 25 early voting sites in 2004 – well above the five that would be required of the county under state law.

As in Clark County, Nevada, elections officials in Travis County are firm believers in locating early voting sites in places with high levels of pedestrian traffic. Early voting sites in the county include grocery stores, malls, shopping centers and large office complexes. Most locations are open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.; in shopping malls, early voting tracks mall hours.

"It makes a huge difference in the expenditure of dollars if you go where the people are," DeBeauvoir commented.

Also like Clark County, Travis County offers the added option of "mobile voting" at temporary polling places. Mobile sites, mostly in low-density, rural areas, open for a half day or a whole day at community centers, senior activity centers, libraries and other locations. Depending on the election, poll workers open up as many as 80 mobile sites countywide – using flyers and other public notices to advertise the availability of early voting well in advance.

In recent elections, at least 50 percent of Travis County voters have taken 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 said.

All of Travis County's early voting sites have electronic, real-time connections to the voter registration database via laptop computers; voters may vote at any early voting site in the county. The county uses DRE voting machines, which eliminate the costs and hassle of having to equip every early voting site with the proper amount of paper ballots for each different ballot required for every election in the county.

Travis County's use of DRE voting machines is another instance of the county's determination to go beyond the requirements of state law. According to McGeehan, some counties in the state still use optical scan voting equipment with one accessible DRE voting machine per precinct, as required by state law. In addition, some counties use an electronic poll book system to connect early voting sites to the voter registration database, while others do not. Those that do not have real-time connections are required to update their voter lists every night. Come Election Day, all polling places are provided with the names of everyone who voted early to help make sure no one votes more than once.

McGeehan said the primary benefit of early voting has been added convenience for voters. She noted that Texas has not been a hotly contested state in recent presidential races; turnout was just over 50 percent in 2004. As a result, the state has not had to deal with a torrent of voters that might strain the system. However, McGeehan is convinced that early voting reduces Election Day lines. An added benefit is that it provides advance warning about how motivated voters are and whether state and county officials are adequately prepared for voters on Election Day.

CHALLENGES FOR EARLY VOTING

Among the major challenges facing early voting in Texas is the same challenge facing Clark County: the availability of suitable sites for the polls. DeBeauvoir said she pays special attention to maintaining friendly relationships with retailers and others who host early voting sites, offering 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."

A related challenge that has arisen in recent elections is the interest of some candidates and advocates in appearing at or near the county's early voting sites to greet voters and distribute campaign literature. DeBeauvoir said the county tries to "warn the candidates away" because their presence only creates more problems for election workers, retailers and voters alike.

From McGeehan's perspective in the Secretary of State's office, one of the biggest challenges for early voting is the capacity of counties to handle the added responsibilities while also preparing for Election Day. Although state law requires early voting to end four days before Election Day, most county officials would prefer it to stop sooner so they have more time to prepare.

"Ending on Friday before a Tuesday election does not give you a lot of time to get everything situated and redeployed," McGeehan said.

Asked to offer her advice for other counties and states considering early voting, DeBeauvoir said adequate staffing is essential. With many of Travis County's early voting sites open 12 hours a day, the county assigns poll workers to morning and afternoon shifts.

"You need to make sure your workers don't suffer too much fatigue," DeBeauvoir said, noting that the split-shift approach also saves the county money because it eliminates the need to pay workers overtime.

DeBeauvoir also recommended that counties consider placing "troubleshooters" in the field to resolve problems at the early voting sites as they occur. Travis County keeps a cadre of vans and trucks available to travel at a moment's notice to polling places that report problems with equipment or that need more sign-in sheets, pens, paper or other supplies.

"We stock these vans so they can travel around and provide quick service so no one runs the risk of being out of service for any time or is without support in the field," she said.

JOHNSON COUNTY, KANSAS

Kansas legislators approved "advance voting" after the 1992 election, which is remembered for long lines experienced by voters, many of whom still were trying to cast their ballots at 11 p.m.

"It was a big fiasco," recalled Connie Schmidt, former election commissioner in Johnson County, which includes the Kansas City metropolitan area.

In the 1996 election, voters in Kansas could only vote early at the county elections office. Despite that restriction, advance voting proved enormously popular among Kansans during its inaugural run, leading Schmidt and other county officials to lobby the state for the ability to open more early voting sites.

Thanks to changes in state law, Johnson County opened two additional sites in 2000 and 2004. Forty percent of the county's voters -- 100,000 in all -- took advantage of the opportunity to vote early at one of the three sites in 2004.

"We found that if the advance voting location was convenient to work or home, more people would choose to vote in person than by mail," Schmidt said, noting that the county chose advance voting sites near large employers. Adding to the convenience for voters, the county keeps the voting sites open until 7 p.m. on weekdays, as well as from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays.

The advance voting period in Kansas starts 20 days before Election Day; the state also allows advance voting by mail. Voters may go to any advance voting location in the county; as in Clark County, Nevada, and Travis County, Texas, all sites are connected to the voter registration database using an electronic poll book system.

"Advance voting takes any chance you won't be able to vote out of the equation," said current Johnson County Election Commissioner Brian Newby. "People are now in control of when they vote, and there should not be any reason why you can't vote."

Newby said Johnson County plans to increase the number of advance voting sites to four in 2006 and eight by 2008. Cost-effectiveness has been a key consideration for the county as it seeks to expand advance voting, he added.

"We're taking a hard look at how many voters we can process per hour to make this a good investment for the county," Newby said.

THINKING POINTS: EARLY VOTING

- **Provide fair and equal voting opportunities.** The placement of early voting sites can be critical. Be sure that all communities have equal access to early voting and that there are enough sites to meet demand. Public input and consultation can help build public acceptance.

- **Consider combining permanent and mobile sites.** Permanent early voting sites rarely offer convenience for all voters, especially in lower-density rural areas. Many counties combine permanent sites with roving, or mobile, sites that move to different locations throughout the early voting period.

- **Be considerate to your hosts.** Shopping malls and grocery stores often are the preferred location for early voting sites. Elections officials need to make it as easy as possible for these and other businesses to play host to early voters—for example, by ensuring minimal disruption of normal business operations and offering ample public praise and thanks.

- **Spread the word.** The success of early voting depends entirely on how many people know about it. Elections officials need to devote considerable effort to communicating with voters about where, when and how they can vote early—and promoting early voting as a convenient option for people with busy lives.

- **Evaluate management practices.** With the introduction of early voting, election officials will need to develop new practices and procedures. There will be new demands on election systems such as: Election workers will need to work multiple days, ballots and/or voting machines will need to be secured at the end of each day and voter registration lists will need to be updated regularly. Developing detailed, sound management and implementation plans for these new conditions will help to build public confidence in the system.

ELECTRONIC POLL BOOKS

Elections officials across the country are turning to electronic poll books as a way to bring added speed and efficiency to polling place operations. The idea is to provide poll workers with PCs, laptops or personal digital assistants (PDA) that connect them to the voter registration database. In addition to making the check-in process faster, electronic poll books offer an easy way to check (and change) voters' addresses on the spot and, if they're in the wrong place, direct them to their proper polling place.

In November 2005, voters arriving at the polls to cast their ballots in a city election in Lake Mary, Florida, were given a choice. They could check in according to the traditional way, with poll workers scanning for their names in a paper poll book. Or, they could swipe their driver's licenses through a card reader and sign a tablet PC screen to affirm their names and addresses.

Seminole County Supervisor of Elections Michael Ertel said the city election, with its relatively low turnout, was a perfect opportunity to test the electronic sign-in procedure: which passed with flying colors. When the county timed the check-in procedure – from the word "Hello" to the moment voters were handed their ballots – it found that the traditional approach resulted in an average check-in time of 55 seconds. Using electronic check-in, voters had their ballots in a speedy 4 seconds.

"If you scale that to what happens in a large election, you are talking about moving people through the polling place with unprecedented speed," Ertel said.

Seminole County is not the only jurisdiction experimenting with electronic means of bringing added speed, convenience and efficiency to polling place procedures. The following stories from Florida and Tennessee show how some elections officials are experimenting with electronic poll books – and what they are learning.

SEMINOLE AND ORANGE COUNTIES, FLORIDA

In Seminole County, located just north of Orlando, elections officials have been looking for ways to speed up the process of voting and "let voters get back to their work and their lives as quickly as possible," Ertel said.

With electronic poll books, they believe they may have found a way. Soon after Florida changed state law to allow electronic poll books to be used as part of the check-in procedure at the polling place, the county engaged a vendor to provide the service on an interim basis.

In the same way that airline passengers have an option to wait in line or check in via an electronic kiosk, voters throughout Seminole County soon will have a choice of checking in electronically or "on paper," Ertel said. After the 2005 test run of the system was a success, the county began pushing ahead with plans to phase in electronic poll books on a countywide basis, starting with the most populous precincts.

"EXPRESS CHECK-IN"

Seminole County calls it "Express Check-in." PCs at the polling place are connected to the voter registration database so the system can check if the voter is at the right polling place, as well as what ballot the voter should use. In addition, if the person checking in happens to be at the wrong polling place, the PC can show the correct one on a map. After using one early voting site in 2004, Seminole County opened five in 2005.

According to Ertel, the electronic poll books not only make things more convenient for voters; they also make election workers' jobs easier. For example, under the paper poll book system, workers have to type in who has voted at the end of the day. With electronic poll books, the system records who votes as it happens.

"This is real time and automatic and it will save us numerous hours of staff time after an election," Ertel said.

In addition, by ensuring that voting records are updated

in real time, the use of electronic poll books makes it more difficult for individuals to vote more than once, particularly during early voting.

In addition to the check-in system, Seminole County uses PCs at the polling place to handle address changes and answer voter questions about their registration. Every polling place has a PC with a "soft" voter registration database (i.e., one that is not connected "live" to the database), allowing poll workers to resolve questions or problems as they arise.

"This lets us pull people out of the main line and deal with those kind of issues without slowing down everything else," Ertel said.

ORLANDO GOES ELECTRONIC

Down the road a bit in Orange County, Florida, Supervisor of Elections Bill Cowles also sings the praises of electronic poll books. Home of Orlando, Orange County was the first county in Florida to have laptop computers in every one of its 259 polling places, according to Cowles. As in Seminole County, the laptops allow poll workers to access the voter registration database and resolve problems and questions arising when voters' names do not appear in the precinct's paper poll books.

The use of the laptops has proved "a real time saver" for the county, said Cowles, particularly as it has tried to comply with a new Florida law allowing people to change their addresses at the polling place on Election Day. Orange County's laptops allow poll workers to record address changes on the spot without having to contact the elections office or issue a provisional ballot.

"Especially in an area like Orange County where people are moving all the time, having the laptops has been a huge improvement," Cowles said.

Now, like its neighbor to the north, Orange County is moving to a system of electronic poll books that will allow voters to check in at the polling place via a laptop that is loaded with the voter registration database. Voters will be able to swipe their driver's licenses or another form of state ID to bring up their voter record and sign in. (Voters who do not have licenses can manually enter their names.) All voters receive what Cowles called a "cash register receipt" that they then take to the poll worker responsible for issuing the actual ballots.

Orange County conducted a test run of the system in a March 2004 election in the city of Englewood and plans to use it in more polling places in 2006. Cowles said he views the electronic poll book as a way to increase both convenience and efficiency at the polls.

"Think about the process of having people spell out their names for poll workers and the time it takes to do that" with paper poll books, Cowles said.

Poll workers who used the electronic system in the 2004 city election "adapted well to it," Cowles said. He added, however, that training is "a major issue" when it comes to introducing any kind of new technology at the polling place.

Orange County relies on poll workers to set up all of the equipment on Election Day morning. "They need to know how to connect printers, plug everything in, connect to the mainframe and more," Cowles said.

Poll workers in Orange County receive 90 minutes of training in hardware and software issues. In addition, the software that the county uses includes numerous on-screen prompts that guide poll workers through set-up procedures and various scenarios they might encounter on Election Day.

Seminole County's Michael Ertel agreed with Cowles about the importance of effective training. Particularly among a poll worker population that tends to be older, elections officials have been reluctant to introduce too many new technologies, Ertel said. However, Seminole County has tested its electronic poll book system among poll workers, and it has received great reviews.

One advantage, Ertel noted, is that the text on the PC screen is actually larger than in the paper precinct register. In addition, the system is designed to be simple. "Even though it is on a computer, you don't have to be a computer scientist to do it," he said.

In addition to training, another concern expressed about electronic poll books is the need for computer connections linking polling places to the voter registration database. Orange County already has two dedicated phone lines in every polling place. In other jurisdictions that are just starting out, counties may have to incur added costs to ensure that polling places have the necessary hook-ups.

In Cowles' view, electronic poll books would be easier and more cost-efficient to implement in a state that allowed elections officials to open a limited number of vote centers (see pp. 2-5) instead of relying on smaller precincts all over the county.

"If you have fewer sites to connect, that's obviously a benefit," he said, adding that some counties might also be deterred by the up-front expense of buying the computers needed for an electronic poll book system.

"Yes, it is going to cost you more than a paper system, but in the long run it's the more efficient way to go by far," Cowles said.

KNOX COUNTY, TENNESSEE

In Knox County in eastern Tennessee, an electronic poll book isn't a PC or a laptop, as it is in Florida. Instead, it is a handheld PDA that poll workers can use to access the voter registration database whenever there's a question or a problem.

Over the years, according to Administrator of Elections Greg Mackay, Knox County, with a population of 400,000, has had "all sorts of problems" with people going to the wrong place to vote. Especially in presidential elections, which tend to draw large numbers of infrequent voters, Knox County residents often arrive at the polls only to find they are in the wrong place. Dealing with these voters, Mackay says, inevitably slows things down as poll workers try to reach the county elections office for answers by phone and, more often than not, cannot get through.

"All day long, all you hear is 'Where do I go vote?'" Mackay said from his office in the county seat of Knoxville.

In elections in 2003 and 2004, however, selected county polling places were equipped with PDAs (called "Precinct Pilots") that had been loaded with the voter registration database. The system, developed by Dave Ellis, the elections administrator in nearby Bradley County, allowed poll workers to pull people out of line if their names did not show up in the paper poll books and direct them to their proper polling place. In some heavily trafficked polling places, poll workers walked through the lines as people were waiting and used the PDAs to check that people were in the right place.

"There is nothing worse than waiting in line for 20 minutes and then being told that you have to go somewhere else," Mackay said. "Now we can just look at this Precinct Pilot and find out where that person is supposed to vote."

Mackay said the PDAs proved a "tremendous help" in keeping lines down in 2004. One poll worker used the PDA more than 100 times to help voters figure out where they had to go, he said. "That would have been 100 phone calls to the elections office."

EMPOWERING THE POLL WORKERS

Knox County has a five-day period for people to change their address before the election. On the last day of that period, the county sends its voter list for loading onto computer chips that run the Precinct Pilots. All of the data is encrypted and password-protected, with the passwords changing at midnight on Election Day to prevent any further use of the data.

So far, Knox County has only used the PDAs in selected precincts – mostly, those places with high rates of mobility and changes of address. According to Ellis, their creator, the Precinct Pilots currently are in use in 10 Tennessee counties; he said the cost to the counties is roughly $100 per precinct.

In Ellis's view, Precinct Pilots empower poll workers to solve problems themselves instead of having to always turn to the county elections office. And, because the technology is simple to use, training has not been a problem, he adds.

Of course, Precinct Pilots are not the only answer to helping voters who don't know where to vote. Another strategy used by Knox County has been to drive traffic to a page on the county Web site where voters can look up their polling places, based on their addresses.

Looking ahead, Mackay said he would like to see the county move toward a model of "convenience voting" that might eliminate the problem of people being at the wrong polling place altogether.

Currently, Knox County allows early voting; in 2004, a record 60 percent of county residents who voted did so during a 14-day period ending five days before Election Day. The early voting was held at eight locations, including county buildings, libraries and shopping centers. Mackay said he was on radio talk programs every morning encouraging people to vote early.

Mackay would like to expand the number of locations where people can vote early – and, ultimately, move to a limited number of vote centers that would be open for a defined period ending on Election Day. The vote centers would eliminate the need for Precinct Pilots entirely, Mackay said, because they would all be connected in real time to the voter registration database – and because anyone could vote anywhere. However, legislation to allow central voting locations in Tennessee has been bottled up in the state legislature. Mackay hopes it will pass soon.

"Why you have to go to a particular place on a particular day to vote doesn't make sense. You don't have to go to one Walgreens," he said, referring to the drug store chain.

For the time being, Knox County is doing what it can to make the current system as efficient as possible, in part by putting its entire voter registration database directly in the hands of poll workers.

THINKING POINTS: ELECTRONIC POLL BOOKS

- **Start slow**. Many counties that are using electronic poll books rolled out the concept during smaller, off-year elections. Starting slow (and small) allows elections officials to work out any kinks in the system and acclimate poll workers to the new technologies before the pressure cooker of a major election.

- **Make sure poll workers are ready**. Poll workers need to be adept with the technology come Election Day. Elections officials should provide ample training, including time for workers to become comfortable using the technology to address the full range of Election Day issues and scenarios.

- **Weigh the costs and infrastructure needs.** In addition to the cost of the hardware and software, most electronic poll book systems require phone and/or high-speed modem links between polling places and the county elections office. One option: starting with only those precincts with high mobility and high rates of address changes.

- **Combine with other innovations.** The cost efficiency of electronic poll books is proportional to the number of polling places in a county. Some elections officials say the electronic option works best in combination with the use of vote centers and early voting.

UNIFORMITY AND STANDARDS

T he Center for Election Systems at Kennesaw State University has played a crucial, if behind-the-scenes, role in Georgia's efforts to reduce voting problems and make the process work more smoothly. From certifying equipment to providing training and serving as a laboratory for new ideas, the center is a model for other states that view uniformity and standards as the way to make elections work for all.

Florida may have gotten all of the attention in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election, but its neighbor to the north struggled with plenty of voting problems, too.

In fact, Georgia produced more "undervoted" ballots in the 2000 election than Florida, 100,000 in all. In one county, the undervote – the number of ballots for which the voter's intent could not be determined in the top two races – was 20 percent. Put another way, the votes of one in five people in that county were not counted in either the presidential or vice presidential elections.

However, because the final presidential vote was not as close in Georgia as it was in Florida, most Americans never even knew that things in the Peach State hadn't been so peachy. Determined to make sure Georgia wouldn't become "the next Florida," Secretary of State Cathy Cox embarked on a campaign to move from a decentralized, scattershot approach to a uniform, statewide voting system.

"We recognized we had a problem, and we wanted to make uniformity and efficiency two hallmarks of the state's voting system," explained Kathy Rogers, director of elections in the Secretary of State's office.

AN EVOLVING SET OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Georgia's move to a uniform election system has been supported and, in many cases, spearheaded by the Center for Election Systems at Kennesaw State University. The center's executive director, Merle King, says its role is to "implement elections according to the law."

While the center started with a focus on standardizing and testing voting technologies in the state, its responsibilities have evolved and grown to include numerous aspects of elections administration, from poll worker training to creating ballots for local jurisdictions.

Technology Testing. In the aftermath of the 2000 election, Georgia decided to move from a system that relied on a broad array of voting technologies – including optical scan systems, lever machines and hand-counted paper ballots – to just one technology statewide. The chosen technology was DRE, or touch-screen, voting machines.

With 19,000 new voting machines about to be delivered to local jurisdictions throughout the state, Georgia turned to the Center for Election Systems to handle quality control. The center's chief assignment: "acceptance testing" for all new equipment. In addition, staff from the center were on hand at the vendor's warehouse to audit the assembly, loading and shipment of all of the new equipment.

"Our work established an arms-length relationship between the vendor and the state and helped ensure there was some real accountability in the process," King said.

In the initial rollout of the new voting equipment, King added, the center "failed" 1,000 pieces of equipment which had to be replaced by the vendor. King explained that the problems identified by the center – which ranged from cracked cases to machines that were loaded with incorrect software – were not a sign of "gross hardware failure." Rather, they were a reflection of a rigorous approach to quality control stemming from the state's determination to "get things right, right from the start," King said.

Training. Under Georgia state law, all county elections officials are required to complete 64 hours of training by January 2007 – not just so they can know how to operate the new equipment but also to educate them in areas from legal and ethical issues to poll worker training. To meet

the training requirement, the Center for Election Systems teamed up with the Secretary of State's Office to design the Georgia Election Official Certification Program (GEOC). The center also conducts training sessions throughout the year for county elections officials.

Director of Elections Kathy Rogers credits the center with providing "crucial, hands-on support for counties" as they set out to comply with state requirements. With 3,000 polling places throughout the state, she said it is not possible to provide training to all poll workers. Instead, the center has adopted a train-the-trainer model in its programs, while also providing a variety of "training aids" for counties to use themselves.

Ballot Building. New voting technologies meant that local ballots could no longer be designed and "built" as they had been in the past. To assist county officials while at the same time bringing added uniformity to ballots across the state, the center has built ballots for 110 of Georgia's 159 counties. For the remaining counties that built the ballots themselves or contracted with an outside vendor, the center reviewed the databases and ballots for adherence to state standards.

In addition to these roles, the center maintains a call center for county elections officials, mostly to troubleshoot problems and answer questions. The center also maintains an "election lab" that is set up as a mock polling place.

ONE COUNTY'S PERSPECTIVE
Patti D. Brown, election supervisor in Georgia's Carroll County, said the center's work, together with the state's focus on uniformity in elections, has been "an enormous plus" at the local level. Located 50 miles west of Atlanta, Carroll County has taken advantage of the full array of services provided by the Center for Election Systems, including training, technical support, ballot building and more.

"It is immeasurable how much support we get" from the center, Brown said. Brown further noted that she and her staff regularly contact the center on an informal basis with questions. "When we are having a problem with a machine or when we have questions, we contact Kennesaw State and there is always someone there to help us."

Brown has worked in the elections office for 31 years. She said Carroll County has always had good support from the state. However, the support for localities from the Center for Election Systems is "unprecedented," she said. And, given the administrative complexities associated with bringing electronic voting systems online, Brown added that the center's work is critical to counties all over Georgia.

"I cannot imagine being able to pull off this shift (to electronic voting) without Kennesaw State helping us out," Brown said.

TESTING NEW APPROACHES
Beyond its official roles, King said the Center for Election Systems also has become a place to develop and test new approaches to elections and polling place management.

"Our staff here are highly skilled and have studied elections – it's in our blood," King said. "So if someone has an idea or an innovation that they think might make a difference, we're as good a place as any to brainstorm and try and figure out if it will work."

For other states that might be considering a more centralized approach to managing elections, King had a few pieces of advice. The first is that the ability of the Center for Election Systems to make a difference in Georgia has been a direct result of the state's decision to adopt a uniform voting technology. Without a statewide focus on uniformity and standards, King said a center such as his could not be nearly as effective.

In addition, he noted that the choice of the right college or university partner is essential. "Not every place can adapt to this kind of work," he said, noting that a significant amount of the center's research is focused on copyrighted, proprietary systems. As a result, faculty members may not be able to publish their research, and confidentiality is an important concern.

King said many states have contacted him and his staff to express interest in setting up a center like Georgia's. The interest in uniformity and statewide standards in elections does not surprise him, given the many problems that have come to light since 2000.

"To get quality in elections, you need to have standards. And to get to standards, you need uniformity," King said.

He added that he can't imagine Georgia going back to running elections based on what he called "a patchwork approach." "Elections have become so complex and voting technologies so sophisticated that counties simply cannot be expected to do everything on their own," King said.

Rogers added that the Center for Election Systems should be a "model for the nation." Its most important function, she said, is the direct support it provides to counties. "The center's staff are out there in the counties and understand what people need in order to create the best experience for Georgia voters," Rogers said.

Conclusion

Early voting, the use of vote centers and electronic poll books are just three of the innovations that elections officials around the country are experimenting with in their efforts to make the voting process more efficient and more convenient. Uniformity and standards are steps contemplated by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 and can achieve major payoffs in the form of greater efficiency and a more positive voting experience. Perhaps the most important thing that people are learning as they move forward with these and other new approaches is that change is possible--and that it can offer unanticipated rewards.

Instead of posing a burden to elections officials, reforms such as early voting actually can end up relieving the pressure on local jurisdictions to process significant numbers of voters on Election Day. Similarly, creating full-service vote centers can reduce staffing and equipment needs for

counties. The use of electronic poll books takes the pressure off the county elections office, allowing problems to be solved where they happen: at the polling place. Uniformity, standardization and consistency are hallmarks of well-run systems.

The League of Women Voters encourages elections officials across the country to continue exploring these and other innovations, and to work with citizens and concerned organizations in accomplishing positive change. In some jurisdictions, changes to state election laws or procedures may be required in order to enact some of these innovations. The League promises to not only stand with elections officials as we work to enact positive change, but also to continue to document how real communities around the country are tailoring the administration of U.S. elections to the needs, the interests and the lives of U.S. voters.