

Poll Worker Training / Election Observation Program

November 4, 2008, General Election Report



December 30, 2008

Debra Bowen

California Secretary of State

Poll Worker Training / Election Observation Program

November 4, 2008, General Election Report

Poll workers are central to every county's Election Day process and to every voter's Election Day experience. They are responsible for delivering Election Day services to voters and for closely monitoring the security of ballots and equipment, polling place activities, and compliance with the California Elections Code. Poll workers must take corrective action when necessary to ensure the integrity of the election process. During the February 5, 2008, Presidential Primary Election, several issues arose that were reported by the Secretary of State's Election Day observers, by concerned citizens, and by the media. The Secretary of State's staff discussed the observation reports with county elections officials and shared ideas for possible solutions to the problems noted in those and other counties.

During the June 3 Statewide Direct Primary Election, the Secretary of State's office concentrated on assessing the level and effectiveness of poll worker training. Observers attended county poll worker training classes and followed up by visiting polling places on Election Day to assess how each county's training impacted Election Day activities of voters and poll workers. Observers reported a marked improvement in the conduct and administration of the election compared to the February 5, 2008, Presidential Primary Election. County poll worker trainers addressed issues that had been reported in February, even if those issues had not been observed in their county. Counties also implemented innovative approaches designed to make the election process easier for poll workers and for voters. These results are noted in the Poll Worker Training / Election Observation Program June 3, 2008, Statewide Direct Primary Election Report, which can be found at http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voting_systems/historic/poll-worker-training-observ-prog-06032008.pdf

For the November 4, 2008, General Election the Secretary of State took a more focused approach, due to funding and personnel limitations. Observations made during the June Statewide Direct Primary Election indicated most poll worker training programs had been effective in addressing problems raised in February. However, two counties had training deficiencies on single issues that still needed to be resolved between June and November. In Nevada County, a new voting system was introduced in time for the June 3, 2008, Statewide Direct Primary Election. Training on that equipment was found to be insufficient to allow poll workers to handle problems at the polling place without additional help. In Solano County, poll workers openly questioned the need to use secrecy sleeves as required by law.

In other counties, isolated Election Day incidents occurred in June, none of which could be traced directly to lapses in poll worker training. However, an attempt to preclude possible polling place incidents from occurring in California in the November General Election, the Secretary of State focused on following up with Solano and Nevada counties, and observing the Election Day process in some larger counties.

Background

The 2006 election cycle was the first in California during which counties were required to comply with all of the requirements of the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA). The Election Day Observation Program was implemented to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the election process in selected counties over the course of Election Day. The goal was to assess how counties were meeting the challenges of implementing HAVA and how the Secretary of State could best support counties in successfully implementing these changes. In the June 2006 primary election, 31 election observers were sent to 23 counties across the state. The observers (all Secretary of State employees) were charged with reporting how the county elections officials, poll workers, and voters responded to the changes and what they found to be the biggest challenges in meeting the new HAVA requirements.

To help each county identify how it needed to strengthen its poll worker training and voter education programs, staff members from the Secretary of State's Elections Division shared with each county elections official what the Secretary of State observers saw in their county on Election Day. County officials also were invited to suggest how the Secretary of State might provide better support and guidance to counties in areas of concern.

The effectiveness of this approach seemed to be borne out when 33 Secretary of State staff members visited 31 counties during the November 2006 General Election. Issues that had been observed in June were either drastically mitigated or resolved by November. Voters seemed more aware of how the voting equipment was supposed to work and what they could expect at the polls than they had been in June. The counties and their voters appeared to be meeting the challenges of adapting to the new voting systems mandated by HAVA, and most poll workers and voters were comfortable with the process by the end of 2006.

The February 5, 2008, Presidential Primary Election was the first statewide election held in California under new use procedures and security guidelines for voting systems set by Secretary of State Debra Bowen. Twenty-one counties that had used a direct recording electronic (DRE) voting system as their primary means of balloting in 2006 returned to using a paper-based optical scan voting system in 2008. On Election Day, observers from the Secretary of State's office were sent to 31 counties to observe the election process. They were told to report any problems or challenges they felt needed immediate attention and to provide an overview on issues that were common to the polling places that they visited, as well as any apparent underlying causes and/or possible remedies.

For the June 3, 2008, Statewide Direct Primary Election, 20 observers from the Secretary of State's office attended poll worker training classes in 38 counties (one in each county). On Election Day, 10 of those observers visited 18 counties to observe how poll workers carried out the duties they had been trained to perform. Overall, observers who attended

county poll worker training sessions agreed that counties did a very good job in training their poll workers.

November 4, 2008, General Election Observation Program

At the request of the Assistant Registrar of Voters in Solano County, the Secretary of State sent staff members to separate poll worker training sessions to explain the requirement in state law to use secrecy sleeves and the need for compliance. In a follow-up interview after the election, Solano County officials reported their Election Day rovers saw a significantly higher rate of compliance with this requirement at all polling places on November 4.

The Secretary of State staff attended poll worker training in Nevada County, and reported that training on the new voting system was more complete and effective than it had been prior to the June election. Poll workers were walked through every step of set-up, use, closing procedures and basic trouble-shooting and appeared to be far more comfortable working with the equipment than they had been in June. Other aspects of the training program had been enhanced to be more informative and effective as well.

Observers were not sent to Solano or Nevada County on Election Day, due to limited personnel resources.

Counties Selected for the November 4, 2008, General Election Day Observation Program

| | | |
|--------------|-----------|------------------|
| Alameda | Monterey | San Bernardino** |
| Los Angeles* | Riverside | San Diego |

*Two observers went to Los Angeles County.

**The observer scheduled to go to San Bernardino had to cancel on Election Day, due to a death in the family.

The Secretary of State sent observers to counties which, due to their size and history of Election Day issues, were most likely to experience challenges such as long lines, ballot shortages, or other issues that had occurred as the result of large voter turnouts in other states during early voting.

Experienced Secretary of State staff members, who had served as observers in both the February and June elections, were assigned to work as observers on November 4. They used the same guidelines that had been used in the previous elections, and called in regularly to the Secretary of State's office to report their observations.

Observers in all counties reported that overall, the process ran smoothly with fewer problems than had been observed in previous elections with lower voter turnout. County election officials appeared to be well prepared for contingencies, such as potential ballot shortages, and voters were more comfortable with polling place procedures in what was the third statewide election of the year.

There were only two incidents observed by the Secretary of State's observers all day. In one, there was an incident of electioneering that was quickly and effectively handled by poll workers.

In another, a Secretary of State observer was directed to a polling place to assess a voter complaint that a voting device in Los Angeles County had not marked his ballot correctly. The Los Angeles County elections inspector and the Secretary of State's staff were able to explain how the voting device worked, and reassured the voter that his presidential vote had been cast. The voter was grateful for the assistance and was more confident that his vote would be counted.

There were no reports of voter intimidation, polling places running out of ballots, exceptionally long lines (except a handful of reports when polling places opened at 7:00 a.m.), voting machine failures, or other Election Day incidents that had been reported in other states.

Follow-up on Election Day Issues Noted in Prior Elections

A number of issues or problems appear in almost every election, despite diligent planning, training, and preparation. Many of the problems that had been observed in February had been addressed and resolved by the June election. Other issues may never be resolved completely. Inadequate facilities, lack of available parking for voters, lack of suitable places to post required signs, improper voter registration (i.e., the voter moved or changed name since registering), or last-minute relocation of polling places appear to be perennial problems inherent in the logistics of conducting elections at neighborhood polling places in diverse local communities.

Issues noted in previous elections fell into seven basic categories:

- Ballots and Registration
- Signs and Flags
- Polling Facilities
- Staffing
- Voting Equipment
- Voter Awareness
- Poll Worker Training

As in the June election, there were few reports of problems in these areas in November.

Ballots and Registration

Because all voters received the same ballot, there were no issues with Decline to State (DTS) voters as there had been in February. Because more than one million Californians registered to vote in the last month of the registration period, county election officials were well prepared with an ample supply of provisional ballots to handle any voters whose names may not have been included in the precinct roster. Poll workers and voters appeared to be more aware of the provisional ballot options, and there were no reported

problems in this area. Many vote-by-mail ballots were turned in at the precincts on Election Day.

Signs and Flags, Polling Facilities

All polling places are required by law to have exterior signs to indicate the location of the polling place. An American flag must also be displayed at or just outside the door to the polling place. Several signs, such as the Voter's Bill of Rights, the sample ballot, and a sign warning against tampering with voting equipment, are required to be posted in all mandated languages inside the polling place.

Compliance with signage laws continued to vary widely among polling places. Sometimes poll workers are unable to hang the flag or post the exterior sign where it is easily visible. Posting of interior signs is also inconsistent. If the county does not furnish all of the signs on a stand-alone easel or signboard, poll workers must find a suitable place to post the required signs, something that may not be possible in some facilities. The challenge of posting signage, both inside and outside, continues to be an issue in some polling places.

Staffing and Voter Awareness

In anticipation of a large voter turnout, county registrars of voters were especially aggressive in recruiting poll workers. As a result, all polling places visited were well-staffed, and the poll workers appeared to be comfortable in their roles. Voters, too, seemed to be more aware of what to expect at the polls. The Secretary of State's staff noted that, perhaps in response to reports of problems during early voting in other state, more major newspapers ran prominent articles on how voters could help make the election process run more smoothly.

County voter education efforts were also covered well in the media, both in relation to Election Day procedures and vote-by-mail issues.

Voting Equipment and Poll Worker Training

Poll workers at the polling places visited appeared to be comfortable with the voting equipment, perhaps due to the emphasis on hands-on equipment training in most of the counties observers visited in both in June and November. There were no problems observed with the voting equipment.

Conclusions

Although more voters cast ballots on November 4, 2008, than in any previous California election, Election Day was relatively trouble free. Whereas the Secretary of State Voter Hotline received 20,000 calls on February 5, 2008, during the Presidential Primary (with 9 million voters casting ballots), the volume of calls on November 4, 2008, fell to 18,564 (when more than 13.7 million voters cast their ballots). While a significant number of calls in February related to voter complaints or confusion about decline to state voter

rights issues and other problems, the callers in November more frequently asked routine questions such as how to find their polling place or where they could return a vote-by-mail ballot. Observers and county officials across the state reported that the election ran more smoothly than anticipated, with fewer problems or incidents than were normally observed in most statewide elections. Careful planning, experienced staff and poll workers and voters who were more aware of voting procedures all appeared to contribute to a reportedly trouble-free Election Day.