

Poll Worker Training Observation Program

June 3, 2008, Statewide Direct Primary Election Report



September 3, 2008

Debra Bowen

California Secretary of State

Poll Worker Training Observation Program

June 3, 2008, Statewide Direct Primary Election Report

Poll workers are on the front lines in delivering Election Day services to voters. They represent the last chance to provide voters with information about their rights at the polls, and with details about the requirements to ensure their ballots are properly cast. Poll workers are integral to ensuring the integrity of the election process, which is why the quality and effectiveness of poll worker training is so important. While the training of poll workers is the responsibility of local elections officials, the Secretary of State, as California's chief elections officer, has a strong interest in ensuring poll workers are properly trained to assist the state's 16.1 million registered voters.

The Secretary of State's office began an Election Day Observation Program in 2006. Initially, the program focused on observing activities in many counties from 7:00 a.m. when the polls open until well after the polls closed at 8:00 p.m. and the ballot tabulating process had begun. However, for the June 2008 Direct Primary Election, the Secretary of State instead focused her attention on assessing poll worker training conducted in 38 counties.

The Secretary of State sent 20 observers to 38 counties to attend poll worker training sessions aimed at entry-level poll workers. The Secretary of State's observers were asked to report on the methods of instruction, the topics covered or ignored, the level of interest of poll workers attending the training, and whether it was easy for the average person to understand the instructions. On Election Day, 10 of those observers visited four to eight polling places in 18 of the 38 counties to assess whether each county's training paid off for voters and poll workers.

Key Issues in the February 5, 2008, Presidential Primary Election

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 established by Secretary of State Debra Bowen in August 2007. Twenty-one of the 23 counties that had used direct recording electronic (DRE) voting system as the primary means of balloting in 2006 returned in 2008 to using the paper-based optical scan voting system that the remaining 35 counties have used for a number of years.

On February 5, 2008, Secretary of State observers were sent to 31 counties to observe the election process. The observers were asked to report any problems or challenges that they felt needed attention, to provide an overview of issues that were common to the polling places they visited, and to comment on any apparent underlying causes and possible remedies.

Following are some of the most common problems the Secretary of State's observers reported on Election Day.

- Polling place signs that were not easily visible from the roadway or that failed to guide the voter to the polling location as required by law. A component of this problem was the failure to post a flag outside the polling place to help voters identify the correct path to get to the polling place.
- The inability or failure to post voter information signs inside the polling place as required by law. Some facilities used as polling sites did not have a place to post signs where voters could read them before receiving their ballots and voting. Poll workers in counties that did not use free-standing boards to display the signs had to post the signs either on the front of the poll worker table (where they could not be seen if voters were lined up in front of the table) or place them on the table itself (where they could not be read without holding up the voter line).
- Decline-to-state (DTS or nonpartisan) voter and poll worker confusion about the ballot choices. Poll workers in a significant number of counties were confused about the rights and ballot options available to DTS voters, and about the legal requirements for presenting those options to those voters.
- The failure to use of secrecy sleeves to protect voter privacy as required by law. Poll workers and voters in some counties used secrecy sleeves correctly and consistently, while poll workers in other counties made them available for voters to pick up or did not use them at all.
- Poll worker confusion about how and where to use security seals on voting equipment. Counties use different types of tamper-evident seals for different pieces of equipment. Given the type and number of seals required, some poll workers either used the wrong type of seal for a piece of equipment or failed to use a seal at all, using tape or other less secure means.
- Poll worker confusion about when and how to use provisional ballots to resolve voter registration questions or other issues. Any voter who believes they are registered to vote but does not appear on the voter rolls is legally permitted to cast a provisional ballot. Unfortunately, many poll workers were not familiar with the law and prevented some voters from casting provisional ballots.
- Poll worker and voter confusion about the procedures to be followed when vote-by-mail voters came to the polls. Any voter who has a voted vote-by-mail ballot can turn it in at any polling place in the county in which they are registered to vote. Voters can also go to their polling place to turn in their blank or spoiled vote-by-mail ballot in exchange for a new ballot. Finally, if a vote-by-mail voter shows up at a polling place and reports a misplaced or lost vote-by-mail ballot, they are allowed to vote a provisional ballot. Many poll workers were not familiar with the law and did not allow some voters to exercise their rights.

- Lack of cross-trained poll workers. If a key worker (such as the precinct inspector) was not present, poll workers were uncertain about what to do in some situations. Voters either had to wait for the key person to return, or they left without voting.

Key Issues in the June 3, 2008, Direct Primary Election

Twenty members of the Secretary of State's staff who had previously served as Election Day observers attended poll worker training classes in 38 counties prior to the June 3, 2008, Direct Primary Election. Following each training session, the Secretary of State's observers referred to a list of topics expected to be covered in a poll worker training session and made note of which topics were not covered, were mentioned briefly, were thoroughly covered, or were especially emphasized by trainers (see Appendix A). They also noted how each of the topics was treated in materials given to poll workers attending the training session. They made note of what training techniques were used, how workers were taught to handle issues that had caused problems in previous elections, whether trainees were attentive and whether the training had prepared the people to handle the responsibilities of a new poll worker.

On Election Day, 10 of those Secretary of State observers visited 18 counties to see how poll workers carried out the duties they had been trained to perform. Their analyses were based on the following guiding questions.

- What percentage of poll workers present on Election Day had attended county training (either in person or via the Internet)?
- Did the poll workers perform their duties as instructed in the county training?
- Did counties train poll workers in procedures designed to prevent the recurrence of problems encountered in the February 2008 statewide election? If so, did that training appear to be effective and were those issues resolved? Were there Election Day issues that could not be solved by poll workers?
- What innovative procedures or training techniques helped poll workers perform their duties more effectively?

Counties Selected for the June 3, 2008, Poll Worker Training Observation Program

Alameda*	Madera*	San Benito	Sonoma*
Amador	Marin	San Bernardino*	Stanislaus*
Calaveras	Mariposa	San Diego*	Sutter
Colusa	Merced*	San Francisco	Tehama
Contra Costa*	Napa*	San Joaquin*	Tuolumne
El Dorado	Nevada*	San Mateo	Ventura*
Fresno*	Orange	Santa Clara*	Yolo*
Glenn	Placer	Santa Cruz	Yuba*
Lake	Riverside	Shasta	
Los Angeles*	Sacramento	Solano*	

*Counties that were visited on Election Day

Overall, the Secretary of State's observers who attended county training sessions agreed that county elections officials did a very good job of training their poll workers. The majority of the 38 counties published comprehensive training manuals, which poll workers could use as a reference prior to and on Election Day. Most trainers engaged poll workers and held their attention with a dynamic presentation and the use of visual aids, role-playing, and other techniques to convey the large amount of information in an easy-to-understand format.

Most counties have fewer than 100 polling places, and classes for poll workers in those counties were small (less than 30 people per session). The majority of attendees had served as poll workers in previous elections. The larger counties usually had 50 or more people in their classes. Larger counties also boasted a significant number of returning poll workers – usually half of the attendees.

Training facilities were comfortable and, in almost all cases, it was easy for poll workers to see and hear the presentation and visual aids. Power Point® presentations and election equipment or materials were used as visual aids more frequently than videos or slides. Only two training sessions used no visual aids whatsoever. The Secretary of State's observers rated those two sessions among the least effective, as the poll workers appeared less attentive. Also, poll workers in those sessions did not appear to grasp some of the topics being discussed, especially if they were about equipment or materials (voter rosters, different ballot types, equipment seals, etc.).

Most trainers in the 38 counties kept their students engaged by asking and answering questions (90%), role-playing possible election scenarios (15%), and offering hands-on training (50%).¹ Most instructors were well prepared, knew the material, and were able to answer most of the questions raised by the poll workers. They often referred to the training manuals so poll workers would know where to look for answers to questions that arose on Election Day.

Some of the 38 counties were better than others at cross-training their poll workers. Most counties held separate training sessions for inspectors (also known as precinct captains) and clerks. Only two held separate sessions for specialties within the clerk classification (roster clerks, voting equipment specialists, etc.). Several counties held a separate hands-on training session on electronic voting equipment. Many counties offered Internet training or a DVD as a substitute or supplement for in-person training. Several counties had optional drop-in training sessions or hands-on equipment opportunities to give poll workers a chance to become more comfortable with equipment and processes before Election Day.

Trainers tried to walk poll workers through their duties chronologically, starting with the procedures required prior to Election Day and ending with the return of the ballots and equipment to the county elections office after the closing of the polls. Training manuals were organized in the same fashion, with the addition of special sections dealing with such topics as troubleshooting voting equipment problems and assisting voters with

¹ Total exceeds 100%, as more than one technique was used by many trainers.

special needs. Many counties used quick-reference guides, job cards, and flip books to help keep workers organized so they would be able to quickly find important information.

Poll workers were reminded to call a county elections official for help when they encountered an Election Day problem not covered in their training. All of the 38 counties offered poll worker hotline numbers for this purpose.

Changes Between February and June Statewide Elections

Not all issues that arose in the February election could be solved by changing how poll worker training is conducted. Inadequate facilities, lack of available parking, lack of suitable places to post required signs, improper voter registration (e.g., voter didn't correctly indicate party, voter moved or changed name since registering), shortages of equipment and materials, or last-minute relocation of polling places are problems that impact poll workers and voters but cannot be solved by them.

Issues noted in the February election fell into seven basic categories:

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

These problems were reported to county elections officials when applicable in February. As in the 2006 election cycle, counties modified their training programs in an attempt to correct those issues for the next election.

Ballots and Registration

There were registration and ballot issues in virtually all of the 31 counties visited by the Secretary of State's observers in February. The problems encountered most frequently involved DTS voters, voters who claimed to be registered in another party, voters who were in an all vote-by-mail precinct or in a different precinct, and vote-by-mail voters who chose to vote in person or bring their ballot to the polls.

Counties did an outstanding job of addressing these issues in the training programs for the June Direct Primary Election. At all of the training sessions attended by the Secretary of State's observers, counties strongly emphasized how poll workers should handle these issues. Some of the 38 counties instituted new procedures for poll workers and voters to follow. Many provided new materials (signs, quick-reference guides, revised ballot styles, color-coded ballots, etc.) and increased their voter education efforts.

For the June primary, DTS voters who requested partisan ballots seemed to be more familiar with the choices they were entitled to make. This was a visible result of lessons learned by voters in the last election and the media coverage that followed, as well as the increased voter education efforts by the Secretary of State and county elections officials. Poll workers also commented that DTS situations were easier to handle because of the new tools available to them and their own increased familiarity with the topic.

DTS voter issues were addressed by using quick-reference guides or voter information signs. In many of the 18 counties visited on Election Day, poll workers showed DTS voters a chart or list with the ballot options available to them and asked them which ballot they wanted to use. The poll workers liked this new procedure because having the options shown on a short, easy-to-understand list made it clear to the voter that it was the correct and official information.

Another solution for the DTS issue was color-coded ballots to distinguish between parties. DTS Democratic, DTS Republican, and DTS American Independent Party ballots were color-coded (or striped) to differentiate them from the ballots given to voters registered with those parties. This made it easier for poll workers to ensure that a DTS voter was given the correct ballot.

Vote-by-mail voters have three options if they do not mail their ballots in on time. They can turn in their voted ballot at any polling place in the county where they are registered; turn in their blank vote-by-mail ballot and vote on a regular ballot at the polling place; or, if they do not have their vote-by-mail ballot they can vote using a provisional ballot.

Provisional ballots may also be used by voters who come to the wrong precinct in their county, voters with registration issues (wrong party, first-time voter with no identification, change in address or name, etc.), or voters whose names do not appear on the roster. If, for any reason, a voter's name does not appear on the list of registered voters at a polling place, the voter has the right to cast a "provisional" ballot, which will be counted after elections officials have confirmed that he or she is registered to vote and did not vote elsewhere in that election. It was evident during the February statewide election that not all voters or poll workers were aware of these options.

For the June statewide election, several counties instituted color-coding for provisional ballots and provisional rosters, vote-by-mail ballot envelopes, late registrant roster pages, and ballot counting sheets to make it easier for poll workers to issue the correct ballot and track who was voting on what type of ballot. This also made ballot reconciliation easier at the closing of the polls.

The Secretary of State's observers noted that poll workers seemed to be more comfortable handling provisional ballots and in dealing with vote-by-mail voters who wanted to drop off their ballots at the polling place on Election Day and those who wanted to turn in vote-by-mail ballots and vote at the polls.

Following are some of the creative solutions to ballot and registration problems observed in February that were offered by county elections officials in June.

- Los Angeles County stopped requiring DTS voters who were voting a specific party ballot to fill in a second bubble and instead printed specifically coded partisan ballots for DTS voters.
- Several counties, including San Diego and San Bernardino, created color-coded envelopes and bags to separate vote-by-mail and provisional ballots from standard ballots cast on Election Day. These counties color-coded the roster signature sheets of the provisional roster to match the envelope color to ensure the voter signed for the ballot they were given and make ballot reconciliation easier at closing.
- In Fresno, Madera, Merced, Napa, Nevada, San Diego, Sonoma, and Yuba counties, pre-printed cards and signs were given to poll workers to help DTS voters select their ballot options. The cards and signs were clear and official, and not subject to interpretation by voters or poll workers.

Signs and Flags

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

Compliance with signage laws varied widely among the 18 counties observed during the June statewide election. Sometimes a county did not provide adequate exterior signage or a suitable flag. In other instances, poll workers did not hang the flag or post the exterior sign where it is easily visible. Some counties furnished all of the interior signs on a stand-alone easel or signboard, while others provided the signs along with tacks or tape for posting at the site.

In many instances, there was no suitable place to post the required signs. Flags that did not have a self-standing post often could not be hung securely on a building or the door of a polling place. The “No Electioneering” sign that must be posted 100 feet away from the polling place could not be posted if the polling place was on a street corner or surrounded by a cement parking lot. Inside many polling places, the tables and booths could not be set up near a wall on which materials could be posted, either because there was no wall or because the wall was covered with wallpaper or artwork.

Poll worker training on signs sometimes consisted of simply referring to a list of required signs in the training manual. Frequently these signs were posted on the walls of the training room and referred to during the training sessions. Some counties emphasized the importance of posting these signs, and included the task on a job card or a “to do” list for setting up a polling place.

During the training sessions the Secretary of State's observers attended for the June statewide primary, 84% of the trainers either mentioned or covered the signage topic in detail. Of the training manuals for those counties, 40% of the manuals covered signage in great detail, 37% listed the signs and included them in a checklist for setting up the polls, and 14% simply emphasized the importance of posting the necessary signs.

Over the years, many counties have improved both exterior and interior signage, but problems still remain. Some county election officials believe voters are familiar enough with their neighborhood that they can find their polling places with or without highly visible exterior signage.

No amount of poll worker training can create the appropriate space needed to post the signs that are required by law. Some counties provide poll workers with free-standing signboards that include all required signage. The free-standing boards ensure all required signs are posted in all required languages, and that signage can be easily seen by voters. Counties that do not provide this tool for poll workers cannot ensure compliance with the law in all polling places, regardless of the level of training or good intentions of their poll workers.

San Bernardino County provided a creative solution for the challenge of posting an exterior flag. A thin, sturdy metal flagpole was inserted in a four-foot-tall wooden post anchored on a square board. The result was an attractive stand-alone flag that could easily be seen from a parking lot or the street.

Polling Facilities, Staffing, and Voter Awareness

No amount of poll worker training can help improve the election process if poll workers fail to show up on Election Day. Virtually every jurisdiction struggles with this issue that is largely out of their control.

Alameda County has an excellent poll worker training program, according to the Secretary of State's observers who attended that county's training sessions in 2006 and 2008. Yet the county consistently has problems getting poll workers to show up on Election Day and in many cases, a significant number of precincts are staffed almost entirely by people who are recruited on Election Day to replace poll workers who failed to report.

In an effort to cut down on poll worker absenteeism, San Bernardino County has reduced the number of poll workers required at multiple precinct polling places. In most counties, each precinct has its own staff of five or six poll workers, with one poll worker serving as a "gatekeeper" to greet people and direct them to the correct precinct table. San Bernardino County combines as many as three precincts at one table to be staffed by seven poll workers. There is only one voter roster for all three precincts, but each voter's name has a ballot code number next to it on the roster. This code indicates which party and which precinct ballot the voter should receive. The ballot code allows

the tabulating scanner to separate the vote count by precinct, so it does not have to be done manually. Poll workers found this procedure to be much more efficient and it allows the county to staff a polling place with seven workers for three precincts, instead of the 15 or more poll workers required under the more common practice.

Voting Equipment

During the February statewide election, the Secretary of State's observers noted that many of the poll workers they observed were not comfortable with the voting equipment. That stemmed from the fact that many counties did not cross-train their poll workers, opting instead to only train only one poll worker per polling place to handle equipment issues or to leave all equipment problems for a county rover to handle.

It was noted in both statewide elections in 2006 and in the February 2008 statewide election that many poll workers did not set up a booth that was accessible to voters using a wheelchair, although such a booth was provided to each polling place. People who needed to sit to vote often were put at the end of the poll worker table or a table elsewhere in the room, but their privacy was often compromised.

The use of security seals on voting equipment (both paper ballot boxes and electronic voting units) was more inconsistent in the February statewide election than it had been in 2006. This may have been due to the fact that there were some changes in the voting equipment used in several counties, and both plastic and tape-style seals were used for bags and equipment. Poll workers in some of the 18 counties appeared to be confused as to which type of seal to use and where to place it. The Secretary of State's observers noted poll workers were careful to confirm whether a bag, box, or piece of equipment was not to be opened that it did indeed remain closed and secure, even if the proper seals were not used in the correct places.

The Secretary of State's observers noted that training for the June statewide election included an emphasis on chain of custody and use of the proper seals for system security in only 60% of the counties. If the topic was not emphasized in the training sessions, it was covered in inspector training and/or equipment training sessions. Also, Internet training programs and DVDs were available on voting equipment set-up and closing.

More counties offered opportunities for online or hands-on supplementary training for those poll workers who wanted to become more comfortable with the equipment. Some counties assigned voting system duties to one or two poll workers (an inspector and a judge, for example) per polling place and gave those workers additional training.

More than half of the training sessions attended by the Secretary of State's observers emphasized the set-up of a wheelchair-accessible voting booth. Trainers specifically mentioned that the poll worker table should not be used for voting, and emphasized the importance of voter privacy.

Several counties offered color-coded security seals that matched a bag or color strip on a ballot box or piece of equipment to assist poll workers in determining where to apply seals. They also color-coded logbooks so poll workers could match and adhere the seals in the log when seals were removed for voting on Election Day. Other counties added photos to their manuals to show correct seal placement.

In general, poll workers were more comfortable about where to place seals and which seals to use on each piece of equipment in almost all the polling places visited on Election Day. The exception was Alameda County, where seals were a problem at several polling places. In those instances, the Secretary of State's observers believe the problem of untrained workers was a major factor.

There were few reports of voting system problems in the 18 counties the Secretary of State's observers visited on Election Day. The exception was in Nevada County, where a new accessible voting system was being used for the first time. The machine memory cards had been programmed incorrectly and it took several hours to replace them in order for the machines to work.

Poll Worker Training

The poll worker training issues raised in the February statewide election dealt with the topics discussed above, as well as poll closing procedures and voter privacy issues, especially the use of secrecy sleeves for paper ballots. In February, many poll workers did not use the sleeves at all, some merely set them on the table to be picked up by voters, and others enclosed the blank ballot in the sleeve when handing it to the voter and told the voter to return the ballot inside the sleeve.

Prior to the June statewide election, the importance of voter privacy and using secrecy sleeves was either covered in detail or emphasized in more than half of the training sessions attended by the Secretary of State's observers. It was included in role-playing demonstrations in almost all of the 38 counties.

Poll closing procedures were discussed in great detail in almost all the training sessions observed prior to the June statewide election. Counties modified their procedures, and in some cases introduced new materials to improve and clarify the ballot reconciliation process.

Most poll workers in the 18 counties observed had attended the poll worker training sessions set up for the June statewide election – even those returning poll workers who were not required to attend sessions a second time.

Poll workers who attended training in the month prior to the election were visibly more comfortable on Election Day than those who had not. Those poll worker teams that were cross-trained in the duties of their fellow workers were better equipped to handle unusual situations quickly and discreetly.

Conclusions

Counties responded to problems reported during the February 2008 statewide election by creating new procedures, using new equipment, and strengthening their poll worker training programs. The Secretary of State's observers spoke with many poll workers who appreciated the fact that past challenges had been emphasized in their training classes. The vast majority of poll workers observed paid close attention and responded by performing as directed on Election Day.

Most poll worker trainers easily held the attention of their audiences and effectively used the visual aids available. Interactive techniques such as question-and-answer sessions, role-playing, and trivia quizzes were effective and appreciated by trainees.

County elections officials and poll workers alike face a tremendous challenge. Each Election Day, county elections officials rely on more than 100,000 poll workers who receive only a few hours of training, while those poll workers rely on county elections officials to adequately prepare them for what they will face when the polls open. Counties owe it to voters and the poll workers who are charged with helping those voters to make the procedures as clear as possible, while still ensuring that the law is followed. Counties also need to ensure they are providing equipment to mitigate the shortcomings in polling places (e.g., lack of space to post signs, inadequate lighting).