

Assessing the Rate of Return on a Federal Investment in Voter Education and Pollworker Training

Tracy K. Warren
Executive Director, The Pollworker Institute

Anyone who has attended an election administration conference since the 2004 general election has likely seen Scott Doyle's name on the agenda. Mr. Doyle, a former businessman and current Larimer County, Colorado, Clerk and Recorder, has become a popular speaker on the election administration conference circuit. He has been on the road spreading the gospel of "vote centers," a innovation that has set the nation's elections community abuzz.

In Larimer County on Election Day, citizens travel to a super-precinct, known as "vote center," to vote. Voting machines at these vote centers are programmed with every ballot style so that any eligible voter residing in the county may vote at any vote center. By making this change, the county reduced the number of precincts from 140 to, at most, thirty. The vote centers are staffed primarily by public employees. It's easy to understand the tremendous interest of election officials in this concept; by doing away with the old-fashioned in-precinct elections run by citizen election officials, vote centers eliminate two of the biggest challenges faced by election officials: getting voters to the correct precinct and training pollworkers.

The interest in vote centers is one of many signs that election administration now stands at a cross-roads. The increasing burden of running in-precinct elections staffed by a temporary army of citizen volunteers is pushing election administrators to look for other ways to run an election. The state of Oregon no longer conducts in-person elections; all elections are conducted by mail. Colorado, similarly, conducts its off-year elections by mail. Many states are investigating early voting and liberalized absentee voting as way to reduce the burden - a burden, by the way, that got heavier with passage of the Help America Vote Act.

Election officials have another option, of course. Using funds provided by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), they could take decisive action over the next few election cycles to shore up the twin pillars supporting precinct-based, in-person elections: voter education and pollworker training.

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has disbursed \$2.3 billion to the states. Unfortunately, the purchase of new voting systems and statewide registration systems threatens to consume the vast bulk of the money, leaving very little for voter education or pollworker training. And yet not investing in voter education and pollworker training poses both short and long term risks.

In the short term, as anyone involved in election administration knows, implementing technological improvements without supplementing voter education and pollworker training can lead to disaster. The best voting system in the world does little good if pollworkers don't know how to boot it up on Election Day. And sophisticated database technology won't reduce registration problems if eligible citizens don't know when the registration deadline is or – even more basic – that registration is required.

Over the long term, a failure to invest in voter education and pollworker training puts the tradition of in-person, precinct-based elections at risk.

The authors of HAVA made their intent quite clear: to ensure that every eligible citizen can cast a vote and have that vote counted accurately. While public attention has focused on technological solutions, in fact, well-designed voter education programs could go a long way to meeting this goal at a significantly lower cost. To ensure that every eligible citizen is able cast a vote, all eligible citizens must be instructed on the rules for participating. To ensure that votes will be counted accurately, voters must be instructed how to mark the ballot, electronic or paper.

The law gives specific and precise direction as to what constitutes an appropriate use of HAVA dollars in the area of voter education. States can use these federal funds to educate voters concerning “voting procedures, voting rights and voting technology.” To aid in this effort, the law directs the newly-created EAC to conduct research on “methods of educating voters about the process of registering to vote and voting, the operation of voting mechanisms, the location of polling places, and all other aspects of participating in elections.”

Notably, the kind of voter education called for in HAVA does not include broad-based Get Out the Vote media campaigns. And indeed two secretaries of state landed in hot water for using HAVA funds to pay for expensive public awareness campaigns that strayed from these specific purposes.

Under HAVA, voter education does not mean encouraging citizens to participate in elections; it means facilitating participation by making sure citizens have the information they need. Voter education under HAVA also means educating voters so that they don't make errors that nullify that participation, such as

showing up at the wrong precinct five minutes before closing or voting for two many candidates in a given contest. These examples capture the flavor of voter education under HAVA, specific, maybe a little boring, but critical nonetheless.

The fact is, we know very little about how states are spending their HAVA funds. States have been submitting reports to the EAC, as required by law, since 2004, but this information has not been made public. Last year, the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) surveyed states on how they were spending their HAVA funds. Of the 27 states that responded, 60 percent reported spending up to 10 percent of their HAVA funds on voter education. An earlier survey conducted by the California Research Bureau suggests that a majority of states will spend less than five percent on voter education.

These numbers are glaringly incomplete, through no fault of the organizations conducting the surveys.

For one thing, these surveys do not account for voter education efforts conducted by localities. Although HAVA sends funds to state election offices, in some instances voter education is better left to localities. In states with a wide variety of voting systems, a statewide instructional campaign doesn't make sense. Directing Larimer County voters to a vote center is not a task for the Secretary of State's office. On the other hand, states are well positioned to educate citizens on statewide requirements: when is the registration deadline? Do you have to vote in your precinct? Do you need to bring identification to the polls and what kind?

According to the NASS survey, states have used HAVA money for a variety of voter education programs. States have developed free and paid media campaigns, voting instructional guides, voter ID flyers, public presentations, mailing sample ballots, state voter guides, videos, mock elections, multi-lingual voting materials and educational posters.

In the California survey, the details provided by Oregon describe a voter education program very much in keeping with the kind of voter education called for in HAVA. The state election office, for example, not only implemented a free-access telephone information line, it created an interactive tool to assist call center representatives in answering voter questions. The state provided materials and training for organizations conducting voter registration drives and conducted a pilot project focusing on training paid volunteers registering voters in congregate living facilities. The state also conducted a media campaign that included advertising registration requirements on billboards.

Each one of these projects addresses a discrete, specific need. The state has found ways to let voters know about registration, to facilitate successful voter registration drives and to allow voters to check their registration status.

A popular voter education tool made possible by HAVA include registration status and polling place “look-ups” on state and local websites. Notably, Oregon’s voter information call center has the advantage of not requiring Internet access. Virginia and North Dakota developed palm cards and bookmarks with information about new requirements. HAVA money allowed jurisdictions to mail voting guides to voters.

At some point Congress may ask elections officials to justify how they spent HAVA funds – to show that the public got a return on its investment.

Prior to HAVA, it is safe to say, very few states or jurisdictions made the effort to evaluate the success of voter education or pollworker training. Larger jurisdictions, particularly those run by professional public administrators, routinely track the problems and the success of programs, as well as the risks, costs and benefits, but they are the exception. Most lack resources, tools, manpower and incentive to undertake an analysis of their programs.

Measuring the effectiveness of voter education is also an imperfect and inexact science, but not impossible. For example, if voter education about the process – that is, registration requirements, ID requirements, and precinct-voting requirements – has succeeded, that success will be reflected in the provisional ballot applications. With effective voter education, the number of voters showing up on Election Day only to find their registration or eligibility is in question should go down.

In order to make this evaluation, however, election officials need to design the provisional ballot application to capture information about why the voter needed the provisional ballot. In other words, what was the problem? And after the election someone would have to analyze those applications.

Similarly, looking at voter error rates can indicate the effectiveness of voter instructions about how to operate the voting machine. For example, when the District of Columbia Board of Elections and Ethics implemented a dual system of optical scan and touch-screen voting systems in 2004. The Board mounted a vigorous effort to educate voters about how to use both the new systems. The education campaign included community outreach, mailing guides to every voter, developing demonstration cards in Spanish and English, printing the optical scan instructions on the privacy sleeve and posting information on the

website. The instructions were written in simple language, vetted by literacy experts, and used illustrations and graphics.

After the election, however, the Board found that the reporting program designed by the vendor did not provide enough information to determine voter error rates for each voting system. The results reporting did not, for example, distinguish between absentee ballots and provisional ballots that were not counted because of ineligibility and those that were not counted because the scanner could not read the ballot. The Board is now changing the reporting design in order to capture information needed to make a better evaluation of how well voters are able to use the equipment.

Reporting and analyzing voter errors such as voting for too many candidates in a contest – a mistake made by thousands of unfortunate Palm Beach, Florida, voters in the 2000 presidential election – is key to evaluating whether voter instruction, in addition to ballot design or system interface, is adequate or not. And yet, according to a survey conducted by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission following the 2004 election, only one third of the election jurisdictions reported over-votes.

In short, we cannot determine the impact of HAVA on voter education until we have a more precise accounting of how the money was spent and better reporting and analysis of what happened on Election Day.

The passage of HAVA has had an even more profound impact in the area of pollworker recruitment and training. Yet because pollworker administration remains almost exclusively a local rather than state responsibility, we know even less about how and whether HAVA funds are being used to improve this component of election administration. Six states responding to the California survey reported spending HAVA money on pollworker training.

We do know that HAVA puts a tremendous strain on pollworker administration by requiring jurisdictions to implement both new voting requirements such as provisional ballots and ID requirements and new voting systems simultaneously. State and local election officials overwhelmingly agree that our system now faces a serious pollworker crisis. With many jurisdictions moving to new touch-screen voting systems and contemplating electronic pollbooks, the pre-existing shortage of pollworkers has been exacerbated by the need for more highly trained pollworkers who are comfortable with computer technology.

Even under what were once considered “normal circumstances,” the task of training the army of pollworkers who staff the polls on Election Day represents a daunting challenge. In-person, precinct-based elections require significant

numbers of pollworkers – 20,000 in Los Angeles, for example – to run properly. Most jurisdictions attempt to train these volunteers to carry out complicated administrative procedures and to manage voting equipment in the span of a two-hour training session.

The 2004 Election Day Survey offered a tiny window into the problems of pollworker recruitment. According to the survey, 5,252 polling places were understaffed in the 2004 presidential election. The true number, once the incompleteness of the data and a natural unwillingness to report understaffing are considered, is almost certainly a lot higher.

The survey also revealed that the percentage of understaffed polling places is higher in jurisdictions with low-income levels and lower levels of education. According to survey analysis, “Small, rural jurisdictions and large, urban jurisdictions tended to report higher rates of inadequate poll workers within polling places or precincts. Predominantly non-Hispanic Black jurisdictions reported a greater percentage of polling places or precincts with inadequate number of poll workers. Predominantly non-Hispanic Native American jurisdictions reported the second highest percentage of staffing problems.” These findings, though limited, help explain some of the problems voters encounter on Election Day.

Inadequate pollworker training offers another explanation. Poor training can also lead to significant errors in election procedures.

In 2002, several Florida counties were implementing new electronic voting equipment, but the benefits of that investment did not materialize because the pollworkers were inadequately trained. Also in the 2002 election, one state that implemented provisional balloting for the first time found that eighty percent of the pollworkers in one county filled out the ballot envelopes improperly, neglecting to indicate whether the voter had presented identification. In the 2004 Washington State gubernatorial contest, the losing candidate called for a re-vote after he learned that pollworkers had counted the provisional ballots before the eligibility of the voters had been verified.

Unfortunately, pollworker recruitment and training too often take low priority in election offices. Moreover, training is typically conducted by election officials with limited, if any, professional experience in adult learning. While some election officials have developed creative approaches to the recruiting and training of pollworkers, all would benefit from an infusion of new ideas, professional training and best practices.

Voluntary surveys of localities can provide some information about how these programs are changing. In addition, we need research on whether states, in their role as HAVA fund administrators, are shaping changes in this area. Have states

set standards for pollworker recruitment and training? Are they encouraging the use of HAVA funds for pollworker programs? Are states taking a stronger role?

The EAC has taken a first step in strengthening pollworker recruitment and training, contracting with the Pollworker Institute, the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) and the League of Women Voters Education Fund to compile and test a manual of best practices in recruiting, training and retaining pollworkers.

In order to gauge the capacity of election offices to implement changes in pollworker administration, the League of Women Voters conducted focus groups nationwide. According to election officials in these focus groups, “pollworker recruitment, training and retention are all primarily constrained by shoe-string budgets, limited staff, and a system that historically had little need for change.”

After HAVA, however, change is inevitable. According to the League’s report, election officials understand that

several factors have changed expectations. The advent of HAVA, an increase in public scrutiny of election administration, razor-thin margins of electoral victory in recent elections and recent or anticipated demographic changes have served as agents for change. Election officials are for the first time seeing major changes in election administration practices and are just now beginning to experience the impact on their pollworker practices.

In other words, HAVA, by increasing the demands on pollworkers and the administrators responsible for managing them has provided an incentive for change. If we want to keep our current system, election officials must look for better recruitment strategies, better training methods, better retention tools. HAVA has set the stage for change.

As with voter education, in order to assess the impact of new programs or reforms, election officials need first to establish practices for measuring the current state of pollworker programs as well as subsequent improvements.

Many election officials have found and refined ways to measure the effectiveness of recruitment, training and retention. These methods include tracking which recruiting methods bring in the most pollworkers, evaluating individual pollworker performance, and tracking retention. Preliminary research suggests that few election offices use these methods, however.

In addition to providing models for recruitment and training, the Pollworker Institute aims to develop replicable models for tracking success in pollworker administration. Without solid data on how well pollworker programs are working, we cannot evaluate the health of current programs or the impact of new programs.

The last three election cycles have demonstrated the necessity of tending to the nuts and bolts of election administration: giving voters the basic information they need and training pollworkers to implement proper procedures. These tasks are fundamental to sustaining our current system. While some may view an attachment to this traditional mode of electing our representatives as merely sentimental, in-person, precinct-based elections help guarantee the transparency of the elections. With the rising concern about the potential for fraud, this protection should not be given up lightly.