

*An Evaluation of Election Day Vote Centers in Harris County, Texas:
2019 Harris County Joint Election*

This study was conducted for the Harris County Clerk's Office by Robert M. Stein, Lena Gohlman Fox Professor of Political Science, Rice University, and Elizabeth F. Vann, Director, Center for Civic Leadership, Rice University, with generous financial support from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

1. Introduction

With the May 2019 joint election, Harris County, Texas inaugurated Election Day vote centers (EDVCs). EDVCs, like early in-person voting, allow voters to choose to vote at any polling location on Election Day in Harris County. Election Day voters are now able to receive an appropriate ballot for their residential location wherever they choose to vote in the county. Fifty-two counties in Texas and 13 states use vote centers on Election Day (NCSL 2018). Vote centers have been found to be more convenient for citizens as they can vote near their residence, work or other locations where they travel on Election Day. Previous studies (Stein and Vonnahme 2008, 2012; Cortina and Rottinghaus 2019) show that EDVCs are more convenient for voters, reduce costs associated with conducting elections, and increase turnout among infrequent voters.

To assess the efficacy of EDVCs in Harris County, we conducted interviews with voters as they left early and Election Day polling locations and analyzed the voting histories of all voters in the 2019 joint election. Analyses of these data address several questions:

- Were eligible Harris County voters made aware of the opportunity to vote at any operating polling location on Election Day?
- Where did voters choose to cast their ballots on and before Election Day?
- Did the opportunity to vote at multiple locations on Election Day change where voters chose to vote?
- How did voters evaluate their voting experience at EDVCs and other polling locations?

This is the first of three studies we will conduct on EDVCs in Harris County. We plan to replicate this study for the November 2019 Houston municipal and November 2020 Presidential elections. Studies of these elections will enable us to evaluate how EDVCs operate in settings with larger and more representative voter participation.

2. Background

The 2019 joint Harris County election was a non-partisan election limited to some school districts, municipal utility districts (MUDs) and municipal governments in Harris County. In addition to elections for mayors, MUD directors, city council members and school board trustees, there were a number of bond elections for some of the same and other jurisdictions. Potential voter participation was limited to less than half (~800,000) of the registered voters in Harris County. Turnout for the 2019 joint election was low, with less than 4% (29,155) of the

eligible electorate casting a ballot in the election. Our exit poll and canvass of all 2019 joint election voters shows the composition of those who voted is skewed towards highly educated, wealthy, older, white, Republican voters who also have a history of voting in most elections. Given the nature of this election and the makeup of the electorate, voters in the 2019 joint election were not expected to change their prior voting habits, including when, where, and how they voted. Moreover, Election Day voting was conducted on a Saturday, when voters are more likely to be traveling to the polls from their homes rather than from work or other locations.

For the 2019 joint election, Harris County operated 25 in-person early voting locations throughout the county. On Election Day, 17 of the in-person early voting locations were in operation in addition to 96 polling place locations, for a total of 113 Election Day voting places. All Election Day polling locations operated as EDVCs at which at any eligible voter could cast their ballot.

A challenge for the effective operation of Election Day vote centers is to maintain the quality of polling place locations across the jurisdiction. Variation in the location, staffing and equipping of each polling location risks underserving the population of voters who cast their ballots at ‘inferior’ locations (Stein et al. 2019). Variation in the quality of Election Day vote centers can also create congestion at more ‘desirable’ locations, further degrading the voting experience with long lines and waiting times to vote.

3. Research Design

In the presence of a significant change in how elections are conducted in Harris County, especially on Election Day, we ask four questions:

- Were eligible Harris County voters made aware of the opportunity to vote at any operating polling location on Election Day?
- Where did voters choose to cast their ballots on and before Election Day?
- Did the opportunity to vote at multiple locations on Election Day change where voters chose to vote?
- How did voters evaluate their voting experience at EDVCs and other polling locations?

3.1 Exit Poll of 2019 Joint Election Voters

We surveyed voters as they exited their respective polling places on and before Election Day. The survey asked voters about their voting experiences, why they chose to vote on or before Election Day, where they chose to vote (e.g., near their home or where they work or travel during the day) and whether they had heard about EDVCs. In addition, we asked voters about the quality of their voting experience.

Students from Rice University conducted surveys with voters as they left early and Election Day polling places. In addition, students completed a polling place survey that included information about the staff, equipment and operation of each polling location. Interviews were conducted with 256 voters (1% sample) at early (N=85) and Election Day (N=169) polling places on

different days and times. Locations for conducting exit polls were chosen to maximize the opportunity to survey voters at new Election Day polling locations, evenly across geographies where elections were being held and at different types of polling locations, e.g., schools, churches, supermarkets and community centers. Days and times chosen for conducting our exit poll reflected historical patterns of early and Election Day voting in comparable elections.

3.2 Voter Histories for the 2019 Joint Election

In addition to data obtained from our exit poll of 2019 joint election voters, we analyzed the official voter file of all eligible voters who voted in the 2019 joint election. This file includes the names and addresses of every person who voted, when they voted (i.e., early or on Election Day) and the specific polling location at which they voted.¹ For each in-person² voter we calculated the distance between their residence and each polling location operating at the time they voted. With this information we determined whether the voter voted at the available polling location closest to their home or at some other location and calculated the distance between their residence and the polling location at which they voted.

4. Makeup of the 2019 joint election electorate

Those who voted in the 2019 joint election were significantly older, wealthier, more Anglo, more Republican, more highly educated and more frequent voters than the general electorate. We know from the official voter file that the makeup of this electorate is not representative of either all registered voters in Harris County or even the electorate in higher turnout elections such as midterm and Presidential year elections. However, this electorate is typical of low turnout joint and similar elections.

¹ The voter file includes information on the gender and age of each voter. Using common surnames for African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics matched with the racial/ethnic makeup of each voter's Census Block group location, we estimated the likely race/ethnicity of each voter. The gender, race/ethnicity and age makeup of our exit poll sample closely mirrors the official voter file for the 2019 joint election.

² There were 9,825 (34.8%) early voters and 14,490 (53%) Election Day voters. There were 3,421 (12%) absentee mail ballots. Absentee mail voters are not included in our analysis because they are not in-person voters who voted at either an early or Election Day polling location.

May 2019 Electorate Makeup

Past voting	All of the time	67.3%
	Most of the time	24.8%
	Some of the time	3.5%
	Never	4.3%
Race and Ethnicity	White	66.3%
	Black	5.2%
	Hispanic/Latino	23.7%
	Asian	0.8%
	Other	4.0%
Party-ID	Democrat	24.6%
	Republican	46.3%
	Independent	22.5%
	Other	6.6%
Education	Grade School	1.6%
	Some high school	1.6%
	High school of GED	6.0%
	Some college	24.6%
	College degree	34.9%
	Graduate degree	31.3%
Gender	Male	45.4%
	Female	53.4%
	Other	1.2%
Family Income	Under \$15K	2.6%
	\$15K-\$29K	3.8%
	\$30K-\$49K	7.7%
	\$50K-\$74K	15.3%
	\$75K-\$100K	17.9%
	\$100K +	52.8%
Age	18-35	12.9%
	36-55	37.8%
	56-65	19.7%
	65+	29.6%

5. Knowledge about Election Day opportunities

Nearly two-thirds of voters surveyed (62%) reported that they knew they could vote at any polling location operating on Election Day. The youngest (18-35) and oldest (65+) voters were most aware of Election Day vote center opportunities, while middle-aged voters (36-64) were

somewhat less likely to know about their Election Day voting options. Sixty-six percent of white voters and 62% of Black voters reported that they were knowledgeable about their Election Day voting opportunities, while only 56% of Hispanic voters made the same claim. Higher educated and wealthier voters were both more likely to report they were aware of Election Day vote centers.

Heard About Election Day Vote Center
(% by row)

Have you heard that you can vote at any polling location in Harris county on Election Day?		Yes	No	Not Sure
Age	18-35	63.3%	26.7%	10.0%
	36-54	55.7%	40.9%	3.4%
	55-64	56.5%	37.0%	6.5%
	65+	71.0%	26.1%	2.9%
		Yes	No	Not Sure
Race/Ethnicity	White	65.5%	32.1%	2.4%
	Black	61.5%	38.5%	0.0%
	Hispanic/Latino	55.9%	35.6%	8.5%
	Asian	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
	Other	60.0%	40.0%	0.0%
Family Income	Under \$15K	33.3%	50.0%	16.7%
	\$15K-\$29K	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%
	\$30K-\$49K	72.2%	27.8%	0.0%
	\$50K-\$74K	58.3%	36.1%	5.6%
	\$75K-\$100K	64.3%	35.7%	0.0%
	\$100K +	61.3%	33.1%	5.6%

Have you heard that you can vote at any polling location in Harris county on Election Day?		Yes	No	Unsure
Education	Grade School	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
	Some high school	75.0%	0.0%	25.0%
	High school of GED	53.3%	33.3%	13.3%
	Some college	62.9%	35.5%	1.6%
	College degree	61.4%	34.1%	4.5%
	Graduate degree	65.8%	30.4%	3.8%

6. Voters’ choices of polling locations

Using the official voter file for the 2019 joint election, we identified the distance between each early and Election Day voter’s residence and every polling location available to the voter on or before Election Day. With this information, we identified the proportion of in-person voters who chose a polling location closest to their residence rather than a location further from their home but possibly closer to where they work, shop or travel during the day.

Among all in-person early voters, 65% voted at a polling location closest to their home. Among all in-person Election Day voters only 21% chose to cast their ballot at the polling place location nearest to their home. This wide disparity in the polling place choices of Election Day and early voting voters is less consequential when we examine the actual distance between each voter’s home and the polling location they chose on or before Election Day.

Average distance (miles) between a voter’s home and polling location at which they voted (Std. Dev.)

	Chose location closest to home	Did not chose location closest to home
Early Voter	.7 (0)	.9 (0)
Election Day Voter	.9 (0)	.9 (0)

On average, the distance between a voter's home and the polling location they chose was less than one mile. This distance does not vary significantly among persons who chose to vote on or before Election Day or among those who chose to vote at the polling place closest to their home or one that was further away. This finding is due largely to the number and placement of polling locations on before Election Day. The number and siting of polling locations appears to be sufficient such that both early and Election Day voters could choose from a host of locations which did not vary significantly in the distance from their residence. Further, since the 2019 joint election was not county wide, available voting locations were concentrated in a few areas of the county. In sum, voters had many polling places from which to choose, but within limited, and often non-contiguous geographic areas of the county. These conditions may explain why a large percentage of voters chose a voting location proximate to their residence, even if that location was not the closest available polling place.

7. Did EDVC opportunities change where voters chose to vote?

Using our exit poll results, we identified voters who changed their voting location because of new Election Day voting opportunities as those who reported that they chose their Election Day polling location because:

- it was a new polling location for them,
- or
- because the polling location was near to where they work, shop or travel (but not near their home).

Conversely, we identified voters who did not choose a new voting location as those who reported that they chose their Election Day polling location because:

- they always vote at that same location
- or
- the polling location was near to their home (but not near where they work, shop or travel).

Using these conservative measures, we identified 7% of our sample of voters as persons who took up the opportunity to vote at a new polling location. Using the same conservative measures, we identified 57% of our sample as persons we are confident did not change their voting location. For the remaining portion of our sample, we cannot be certain whether or not they changed where they voted based on their survey responses.

In an election limited to few contests, held on a Saturday, and comprised of voters (67%) who reported they vote "all of the time," we are not likely to observe significant changes in where and when voters choose to vote. Ninety-five percent of those voters who reported that they vote "all the time" chose to vote at their regular voting location.

8. Voters' assessment of their voting experience

Voters in the 2019 joint election positively assessed their access to their polling place, the quality of poll workers, time to check-in and vote and confidence that their vote would be counted accurately. Voters were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or disagreed strongly with the following statements:

- This location was easy for me to find
- I did not have to go far out of my way to vote
- It was easy for me to find a place to park
- The poll workers were helpful
- I am confident that my vote will be counted accurately

In addition, voters were asked how long they waited in line to check in and how long they spent casting their ballot. The table below reports how respondents evaluated their polling places and their operations.

Voters' Evaluation of Their Voting Experience
(% by column)

Location easy to find	Disagree Strongly	5.9%
	Disagree somewhat	0.4%
	Neither agree or disagree	1.2%
	Agree somewhat	2.4%
	Agree Strongly	90.1%
Did not have to go far	Disagree Strongly	5.1%
	Disagree somewhat	0.4%
	Neither agree or disagree	0.4%
	Agree somewhat	4.0%
	Agree Strongly	90.1%
Easy to find parking	Disagree Strongly	5.5%
	Disagree somewhat	0.0%
	Neither agree or disagree	0.0%
	Agree somewhat	2.0%
	Agree Strongly	92.5%
Poll workers were helpful	Disagree Strongly	5.1%
	Disagree somewhat	0.0%
	Neither agree or disagree	1.2%
	Agree somewhat	2.0%
	Agree Strongly	91.7%

Confident vote will be counted accurately	Disagree Strongly	6.7%
	Disagree somewhat	1.6%
	Neither agree or disagree	2.4%
	Agree somewhat	3.6%
	Agree Strongly	85.8%

Voters positively evaluated their voting experience during the 2019 joint Harris County election by margins approaching, and in most instances exceeding, 90%. More than 90% of voters agreed strongly that their polling location was easy to find, that they did not have to go far out their way to vote, that finding parking was easy and that poll workers were helpful. Eighty-six percent of all voters strongly agreed that they were confident that their vote would be counted accurately.

Voters reported extremely high levels of satisfaction regarding their voting experience regardless of whether they voted on or before Election Day. Even voters who chose a new location at which to vote, on or before Election Day, were very satisfied with their voting experience.

As might be expected in a low turnout election, nearly all voters (97%) reported that there was no waiting line to check in to vote when they arrived at their respective polling locations. Given the dearth of ballot choices, 98% of survey respondents reported they took less than five minutes to complete their ballot. Consistent with a low turnout election, 94% of those who did vote in the 2019 joint election reported voting for all ballot contests.

These findings stand out when compared to reported experiences of voters in other jurisdictions that have undertaken change in election operations. In such cases, voters have reported significant dissatisfaction and confusion, culminating in failure to vote because of changes made in where and when voters could vote (Brady and McNulty 2011; Stein et al 2019). The positive voter reviews for this election suggest that the Harris County Clerk's office managed this change well.

References

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Stein, Robert M. and Greg Vonnahme. 2008. "Engaging the unengaged voter: Voter centers and voter turnout." *Journal of Politics*. 70 (2):487-497.

Stein, Robert M. et al 2019 "Waiting to vote in the 2016 Presidential Election: Evidence from a multi-jurisdiction study." forthcoming, *Political Research Quarterly*.

Responses to Exit Poll of 2019 Joint Harris County Election		
Survey Question	Survey Response	%
Why vote early/ED	I always vote early/Election Day	61.1%
	I wanted to avoid waiting in line	21.3%
	I am busy on Election Day	12.3%
	I already made all my ballot choices	5.3%
Why vote here	I always vote here	31.5%
	It is near where I work, shop or travel	8.5%
	It is close to my home	54.8%
	People I know vote here	0.8%
	I wanted to avoid waiting in line	2.8%
	I wanted to try a new voting location	1.6%
Heard about EDVC	Yes	62.2%
	No	33.5%
	Not sure	4.3%
Location easy to find	Disagree Strongly	5.9%
	Disagree somewhat	0.4%
	Neither agree or disagree	1.2%
	Agree somewhat	2.4%
	Agree Strongly	90.1%
Did not have to go far	Disagree Strongly	5.1%
	Disagree somewhat	0.4%
	Neither agree or disagree	0.4%
	Agree somewhat	4.0%
	Agree Strongly	90.1%
Easy to find parking	Disagree Strongly	5.5%
	Disagree somewhat	0.0%
	Neither agree or disagree	0.0%
	Agree somewhat	2.0%
	Agree Strongly	92.5%
Poll workers were helpful	Disagree Strongly	5.1%
	Disagree somewhat	0.0%
	Neither agree or disagree	1.2%
	Agree somewhat	2.0%
	Agree Strongly	91.7%

Survey Question	Survey Response	%
Confident vote will be counted accurately	Disagree Strongly	6.7%
	Disagree somewhat	1.6%
	Neither agree or disagree	2.4%
	Agree somewhat	3.6%
	Agree Strongly	85.8%
Time to check in	No line	97.2%
	Less than 10 minutes	2.4%
	11-20 mins	0.0%
	21-30 mins	0.0%
	More than 30 mins	0.4%
Time to vote	Less than 5 mins	97.6%
	5-10 mins	2.4%
	11-15 mins	0.0%
	More than 15 mins	0.0%
Ballot completion	All	93.7%
	More than half	3.6%
	About half	2.0%
	Less than half	0.8%
Past voting	All of the time	67.3%
	Most of the time	24.8%
	Some of the time	3.5%
	Never	4.3%
Race/Ethnicity	White	66.3%
	Black	5.2%
	Hispanic/Latino	23.7%
	Asian	0.8%
	Other	4.0%
Party-ID	Democrat	24.6%
	Republican	46.3%
	Independent	22.5%
	Other	6.6%
Education	Grade School	1.6%
	Some high school	1.6%
	High school of GED	6.0%
	Some college	24.6%
	College degree	34.9%
	Graduate degree	31.3%
Gender	Male	45.4%
	Female	53.4%
	Other	1.2%

Survey Question	Survey Response	%
Family Income	Under \$15K	2.6%
	\$15K-\$29K	3.8%
	\$30K-\$49K	7.7%
	\$50K-\$74K	15.3%
	\$75K-\$100K	17.9%
	\$100K +	52.8%
Age	18-35	12.9%
	36-54	37.8%
	55-64	19.7%
	65+	29.6%
