

Los Angeles County Vote Center Observation Report, 2020 March Primary

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1 Executive Summary

For the *Monitoring The Election* study, we visited thirty-five vote centers in Los Angeles County during the 11-day voting period. We thank the many vote center staff and leads, who facilitated our observation studies and provided us invaluable feedback from their experiences in the vote centers.

Our qualitative, in-person, election observation efforts are helpful for our research, as observing the different types of vote center locations, examining their layouts, seeing the deployment of the new technologies used by the LA County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk (LACRR/CC), and most importantly, meeting the many people who staffed these locations, provide crucial information for our election integrity research. Our observation studies are also important as they provide qualitative feedback regarding the operations of the new vote center process in Los Angeles County, and the functioning of the new voting technologies deployed in the March 2020 primary elections.

In this preliminary report, we provide our initial observations, as well as some recommendations based on them. This report may be updated in the coming weeks.

2 Finding Vote Centers

2.1 Signage

Most vote center locations were visible from the street, marked with small white directional signs and larger blue flags. In some locations we visited, the blue flags marked the street entrance to the facility, but were not helpful in finding the entrance to the vote center (for example, the Garvey Center in Rosemead). In other locations, the blue flags marked one entrance to the vote center, but not the location from the parking area (for example, Arroyo Seco Library in Highland Park). The small white directional signs had a black directional arrow and a reproduction of the “I Voted” sticker, but did not clearly direct voters to the vote center entrance (they did not say “Vote Center This Way,” for example, which was a complaint we repeatedly heard from vote center staff in a number of locations). Frequently, the “Curbside Voting” signs did not have telephone numbers written in the designated space. These signs are meant to facilitate Curbside Voting, when a vote center worker brings a ballot and a voting device to a voter who cannot physically enter the location. Without the phone numbers, voters who could not enter the site were not able to take advantage of this accessibility service. Finally, we noted that the “No Electioneering” signs were sometimes absent, at the vote center entrance, or inside the vote centers themselves.

2.2 Parking and Exterior Access

A number of the vote center locations we visited, or that we attempted to visit, were difficult to access, and in some cases had limited or no parking. For example, to enter the parking lot at the Covina Masonic Homes (Covina), we had to enter the parking lot through a closed and attended gate. Some locations had very limited parking, or we could only find street parking (San Gabriel Community Rec Center and the Grace T. Black Auditorium in El Monte). In other locations, for example in downtown Los Angeles (Bob Hope Patriotic Hall and Union Station), parking for voting was not straightforward, and so our observers did not stop at those locations. Parking at vote centers located at schools and universities was also tricky. We could not find visitor parking near the East LA College music building and had to park on the street far from the entrance of Wilson Senior High School and the ArtCenter College of Design.

3 Vote Center Location

3.1 Student Voters and Vote Centers on College Campuses

Among the several college campus vote centers, we visited only the one located at the University of California, Los Angeles. The lines that formed at UCLA Ackerman Union (observed once at noon on Election Day, and observed again 90 minutes after Election Day closure) were some of the longest that we

observed. Around a thousand students were standing in line at both times we visited, and it was not clear how much information was provided to them as to how long the expected wait time would be. Additional vote center staff had been requested, and the first reinforcement team was already working to create more check-in points at our noon observation, but it was not clear to our observer that even additional staff would be sufficient to alleviate the long line that had formed. From social media, we also learned that there might have been long lines at vote centers located on other university campuses, for example the USC campus, as well as at CSULA.

While the situation at UCLA may have been exacerbated by many factors—insufficient power outlets for routers resulting in ePollbooks disconnecting from the Internet, ePollbooks that had trouble syncing with the registration database, insufficient provision of information about nearby alternative vote centers, and possibly many out-of-county voters—it appeared that a single vote center was insufficient to cover UCLA. Indeed, by 9:30pm, the ePollbooks were all operational as opposed to when observed at noon, but the number of students in line were just as many, if not more. As we understand it, a pop-up voting center had been set up in a room adjacent to the original vote center. This still proved insufficient to handle the stream of voters.

We suggest a rigorous quantitative evaluation of location and performance of vote centers in Los Angeles County. In retrospect, there are a number of reasons why having only this single vote center at a location like UCLA Ackerman might have been an insufficient provision of service on Election Day. Indeed, UCLA Ackerman was an 11-day vote center. However, there are a number of reasons to predict that there would have been heavy demand for additional vote centers in the UCLA area: younger voters may have been less likely to vote prior to Election Day, and because of the particular contest of this primary election it could have been expected that many voters would wait until Election Day to cast their ballots.

In addition to a rigorous quantitative study of vote center location and performance in this primary election, we suggest consideration of placement of multiple voting locations within large university campuses, as well as the addition of vote center staff on Election Day.

3.2 Business Districts vs. Residential Areas

While Hammer Museum’s long line was likely exacerbated by the situation at UCLA Ackerman Union, we observed that this vote center was probably insufficient on its own to cover the business district in the Westwood area of Los Angeles, where there are many offices and hospitals, prompting voters to cast their ballots near work during lunchtime. Generally, the lines at the vote centers in residential areas on Election Day were manageable, in some cases non-existent. Vote centers in or near business districts seemed severely impacted on Election Day in the March 2020 primary election. More vote centers seem necessary where the working population is expected to vote, and we believe that rigorous quantitative analysis of data from where voters cast their ballots in the March primary will help LACRR plan for vote center location for the November general election.

3.3 Helping Voters Find Less Crowded Vote Centers

The real-time wait data per vote center was not public information in the March 2020 primary in Los Angeles County. However, it would be a good idea to make it available. This is because when a line gets lengthy, there must be a quick and efficient way to notify voters of alternative vote centers that are nearby and have shorter lines. Voters were either not aware of nearby alternatives or were unwilling to relocate to them, as they did not know that if they went to another location the wait would necessarily be shorter. In the March 2020 primary in Los Angeles County, voters could not readily ascertain the wait time in other nearby vote centers in real-time. Therefore, they had to rely on the vote center staff to inform them of these alternatives.

For example, between 2:40pm and 3:30pm on Election Day, our team visited three vote centers which are within 5 minutes’ walking distance from one another: Nueva Maravilla Housing Community, Centro Estrella, and East LA Boys and Girls Club. Nueva Maravilla Housing Community and East LA Boys and Girls Club had no lines, whereas Centro Estrella had a line of more than 20 people. As another example,

at 1:45 pm on Election Day, Allendale Elementary School had no line and multiple available vote center staff. At around the same time, between 12:30 pm and 2:30 pm on Election Day, four locations less than a 6 minute drive away all had lines; the Assistance League of Pasadena (7), the ArtCenter College of Design (35), South Pasadena War Memorial (50), and South Pasadena Public Library (30).

If voters are able to pre-determine the wait time between several vote centers before they set off from home or from work, this will alleviate the disproportionate and long wait time experienced at some key locations.

3.4 Assumptions About Early Voting

We observed a very important difference between vote center utilization on March 3 (Election Day), relative to the pre-election early voting period: there were very few voters in the locations we visited during the early voting period, whereas on March 3 we saw larger numbers of voters in vote centers, with long lines forming in some locations. As we accumulate more data, we will be able to document these differences in voter participation during the early voting period, relative to participation on March 3.

Our observation of relatively quiet vote centers with few voters during the early voting period, contrasted with busy vote centers with long lines on Election Day, indicates that LACRR/CC may have been under-prepared for heavy voter turnout on Election Day, in certain parts of the County. As this was the first implementation of the vote center model in Los Angeles County, and given the very unique context of the Super Tuesday Democratic presidential primary, predicting how many voters might cast early or by-mail ballots, relative to drop off ballots or vote in person on Election Day, would have been difficult.

However, now that LACRR/CC has experience (and some data) regarding when registered voters showed up, and where they tried to vote, that data and intelligence should be used in predictive models to determine areas of the county where there could be high demand for in-person vote centers in November 2020, and in the future. It is also the case that the county might want to develop the capability to deploy more pop-up voting centers, in locations where high demand arises, and to better assist voters who standing in line at busy locations to relocate to these pop-up voting centers.

4 Voter Check-in: Bottlenecks

The most significant issue that we witnessed during our observations was bottlenecks with voter check-in within the voting process. Therefore, many ballot marking devices (BMDs) lay idle while vote center staff were checking in voters. In most locations, lines formed at the check-in stations, and rarely did we see lines forming of voters waiting to use BMDs. This exacerbated the wait time experienced by voters, and we outline some of the reasons for the delays and lines in the vote center check-in process we witnessed below.

4.1 Number of ePollbooks

In general, we observed that there were typically 3-5 ePollbooks that could be used for checking in voters. This may have been an insufficient number of ePollbooks in some vote centers, as processing each voter took time, and without a fast and efficient check-in process lines quickly formed at many locations, especially on Election Day.

4.2 Finding Voters in the System

Ideally, a voter would have brought their sample ballot with them to the vote center, so that by scanning the information on the back of the sample ballot, the voter's record could be quickly located in registration database. Unfortunately, we noted that many voters did not bring their sample ballots with them to the vote centers, and this increased voter wait times and created other issues.

For a voter who did not have a sample ballot, vote center workers would often ask for the voter's first and last name, and search for the voter's record using the first three letters of the first and last name. However, in a large election jurisdiction like Los Angeles County, this is inefficient as there are many records for simple combinations of those search parameters (for example, searching for "ALV/RAM" would return many dozens of records, as was experienced by one of the authors of this report). Vote center staff would then either resort to scrolling through all of the false positive records, or use advance search, both of which take additional time.

In some cases, we observed vote center staff scan the barcode on the voter's driver's license. This typically would occur in situations where the voter offered the driver's license to the vote center staff member, though colleagues of ours reported that in some vote centers staff were requesting that voters provide their driver's license at check-in. This is an important observation: we recommend that vote center staff be informed clearly that they should ask for a voter's identification only in the cases where that is required, they should not ask for a voter's identification as a matter of convenience. Furthermore, we suggest that vote center staff be trained to avoid taking a voter's identification if it is offered by the voter, as that will help prevent other voters assuming that they need to provide their identification to check in.

4.3 ePollbooks, Routers, and Internet Connections

In many cases, the ePollbooks failed to connect to routers, or routers failed to operate due to issues such as no power outlets, slow connections, or possibly bandwidth problems connecting to the voter registration database. In some cases, an entire vote center's check-in process was offline. In these situations, vote center staff were required to only allow provisional voting. This might adversely affect voter confidence, and it certainly may create vote center lines.

4.4 Syncing Issues

Sometimes, a valid registrant showed up as a provisional voter. Many vote center staff cited "syncing issues" with the ePollbooks. Often, the vote center staff reset the ePollbook entirely, or would check another ePollbook for the same voter. In some cases, one ePollbook would show a voter as having to vote provisionally, while another did not. While this was not a problem at some of the low-traffic vote centers, this resulted in vote center staff interrupting one another's check-in processes, and slowing down the check-in process. Our observation teams were not able to determine what was the source of these "syncing issues," and it will require further investigation to determine why in some vote centers only some of the ePollbooks were not providing real-time access to the voter registration database.

4.5 Conditional Voter Registration and Partisan Registration Changes

Some of the key aspects of the vote center model are that it can provide conditional voter registration and partisan registration change on the spot. However, more vote center training seems necessary on those parts, because issues with both contributed to the check-in bottlenecks we observed.

Many voters desired to change their party registrations on the spot, which is a key feature available in a vote center system. While this in itself took time to resolve, sometimes the situation was exacerbated because the voter or the vote center staff did not understand the distinction between changing a voter's partisan registration and obtaining a party crossover ballot in the primary election.

5 Ballot Marking

5.1 Ballot Marking Devices (BMDs)

While in most vote centers, many of the BMDs were not in use because of the issues with voter check-in, we observed that in most every location we visited some BMDs were not available for use, or were unavailable as they had experienced some technical problem. In addition, the BMDs that were operational

sometimes had technical issues that necessitated the voter center staff's time. At one site, we observed a vote center lead successfully fix a BMD by opening the back and restarting it.

5.1.1 Reinserting the Printed Ballot

We frequently saw examples where voters would remove their printed ballot and would walk away from the BMD, seemingly unaware that they needed to reinsert it to cast it. In no instance did we observe voters depart the vote center with a printed ballot, as they typically would be intercepted by a vote center staff member and instructed about how to properly cast their ballot. But this voter confusion distracted vote center staff from other important tasks.

While we are aware that the machine instructs voters to reinsert the ballot at this stage, this is not a straightforward process for a typical voter. Vote center staff may be trained to better inform voters about the use of the BMD in this regard, and more voter education might help resolve this issue in the future. We also suggest that instructions might be placed more prominently in each BMD. In one location, the ArtCenter College of Design, voters in line were offered the "Voting Process Guideline" handout. This allowed them to independently learn the BMD process and lessened the frequency of voters leaving the BMD with their ballot in hand. This is a practice we recommend for future elections for all vote centers.

5.1.2 Paper Jams

In most situations where BMDs were not functional because of technical issues, that seemed to be the result of printing or scanning problems. In some cases, the vote center staff could simply restart the BMD and it seemed to be fixed. In the other case a technician needed to be called to the problem, and the BMD was semi-permanently out of commission. This may have resulted from situations where voters forced their ballot into the scanner rather than waiting for it to catch. These issues with the printing or scanning functionality of the BMDs often seemed to be frustrating to vote center staff and were situations that they devoted time and energy trying to resolve.

5.1.3 Reading the QR Code

Sometimes the BMD failed to re-read the QR codes from a marked ballot or a sample ballot that was to be scanned. This resulted in the ballot being spoiled and the voter having to vote again using a provisional ballot. We were unable to determine the reason for these scanning errors.

5.2 BMDs Powered Down During Early Voting

In many vote centers, especially before Election Day, we observed that vote center staff had intentionally made some of the BMDs unavailable, usually citing a lack of demand. It was unclear to our observers whether this was a LACRR/CC policy decision, or whether it was simply a practical decision made by the vote center staff to save time at the opening and closing of polling for that day. We simply note that we frequently observed in many vote centers the intentional unavailability of BMDs, and leave for future research the pros and cons of this practice.

6 Other Issues

Vote Center Observers

In one vote center location, our observer was asked if they were with the Registrar's Office. When they responded they were not, they were asked to leave.

In another vote center location, observers requested to be present during the closing of the vote center, mainly to witness the process of closing down each of the BMD. The vote center lead was polite when the request was made, however they did call the request in (it was not clear who they called). The lead gave

permission to our observers to witness the closing of the polls, and our group observed the vote center staff close down a handful of the BMDs.

In another location, observation was allowed but the vote center lead said that vote center staff were not allowed to talk to observers.

We note that in Los Angeles County, election observation and poll watching is a long-established practice, and that our observers have encountered few problems with access to voting locations in Los Angeles County prior to 2020 (we have undertaken election observation studies like this since 2001). We recommend that vote center staff be better trained about providing access for election observation to the vote centers while in operation in the election period, as well as to their opening and closing activities in each day of operation.

7 Recommendations

The following are our major recommendations:

- There were clear issues regarding the **Internet connection and syncing of the ePollbook devices** in vote centers which must be addressed.
 - Our team has not had the opportunity to do more detailed forensic investigation of the devices, their connectivity, nor whether there were issues about database access especially on Election Day. We recommend that a through forensic investigation be undertaken to improve the use of these devices and the database in November 2020.
- Issues with the **BMD printers and scanners** must be addressed.
 - Our observers frequently noted that BMDs were not operational because of printer jams and scanner issues. Vote center staff expressed frustration with these problems.
 - Our team has not had the opportunity to do a more more detailed forensic examination of the BMD printers and scanners, so we do not know the causes. However, we recommend that LACRR/CC and its BMD vendor undertake the required research to determine the causes of these issues, and to develop reasonable methods to resolve them, before November 2020.
- LACRR/CC should continue to undertake **quantitative analysis of the placement of the vote centers** in the March 2020 primary, and their relative performance.
 - More vote centers seem necessary in college campuses and business districts.
 - There is need for a better predictive model of when registered voters in different geographic locations are likely to use early voting, absentee voting, or vote on Election Day.
 - This analysis should be designed to improve location decisions for November 2020.
- LACRR/CC should consider **recruitment of additional vote center staff**, and be **flexible about their deployment**, especially on Election Day.
- The process by which vote center staff locate registered voters using the ePollbooks should be improved.
 - A faster and more efficient method for finding registered voters in the system should be designed, and vote center works should be trained in the use of this new process.
 - Vote center staff should be better trained regarding the appropriate procedures for the use of government-issued photo identification for checking in registered voters.
- LACRR/CC should work to build a process where **real-time wait times per vote centers can be publicly available** to voters and vote center staff.
 - This way, voters can more effectively find locations where the lines are short before they set out to vote.
 - This will also allow vote center staff to more effectively inform voters about nearby locations where the lines may be short.

The following are minor recommendations:

- We recommend that BMDs have instructions clearly visible in front of the voter that the printed ballot is to be reinserted. We also recommend that vote center staff inform voters about how to insert the blank ballot at the beginning and ending of the BMD voting session.
- We suggest that LACRR/CC develop better directional signage for vote centers; directional signs should clearly indicate their purpose (not simply have an arrow with the image of an "I Voted" sticker). All exterior entrances to a vote center should be well-marked, the path leading to the vote center should be well-marked, and all other signage (curbside voting, and no electioneering, in

particular) must be appropriately located. LACRR/CC should develop a process to confirm that all vote center signage is appropriately deployed.

- Parking information for vote centers should be provided to voters. In addition, at all vote center locations, parking should be set aside for voters, marked as such, and enforced.
- Voting Process Guideline card should be offered to all voters at all vote centers.

8 Vote Center Locations Visited

Below are the locations we have visited:

Covina	Covina Woman's Club Hall	128 S San Jose Ave	91723
	Masonic Homes of California, Dining Room	1650 E Old Badillo St	91724
East Arcadia	Calvary Grace Church, Fellowship Hall	2520 Peck Rd	91016
El Monte	Columbia Elementary School, Multi-Purpose Room Hall 123	3400 California Ave	91731
	Grace T Black Auditorium, Room 3	3130 Tyler Ave	91731
	New Lexington Elementary School, Cafeteria	10410 Bodger St	91733
Long Beach	El Dorado Park West, Teen Center	2800 N Studebaker Rd	90815
Los Angeles	Centro Estrella, Conference Room	4701 Cesar Chavez Ave	90222
	East LA Boys & Girls Club, Gymnasium	324 N McDonnell Ave	90022
	Nueva Maravilla Housing Community, Community Room	4919 E Cesar E Chavez Ave	90022
	Wilson Senior High School, Multi-Purpose Room	4500 Multnomah St	90032
Los Angeles - Highland Park	Arroyo Seco Library, Community Room	6145 N Figueroa St	90042
	Highland Park Senior Citizen Center, Senior Club Room	6152 N Figueroa St	90065
	San Pascual STEAM Magnet Elementary, Parish Hall	815 San Pascual Ave	90042
	All Saints Episcopal Church, Parish Hall	5619 Monte Vista St	90042
	Yorkdale Elementary School Auditorium	5657 Meridian St	90042
Los Angeles - Montecito Heights	Hermon Community Methodist Church, Fellowship Hall	5800 Monterey Rd	90042
Los Angeles - Westwood	UCLA Ackerman Union, Bruin Reception Room	308 Westwood Plaza	90095
	Hammer Museum, Annenberg Terrace	10899 Wilshire Blvd	90024
Monterey Park	East LA College, Music Bldg - Room 121	1301 Cesar Chavez Ave	91754
	Langley Senior Center, Friendship Room	400 W Emerson Ave	91754
	Monterey Vista Elementary School Library	901 E Graves Ave	91755
	Sierra Vista Park, Main Room	311 N Rural Dr	91755
	Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church	333 S Garfield Ave	91754
Norwalk	LA County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, Room 3201	12400 Imperial Hwy	90650
Pasadena	H&H Jivalagian Youth Center, Youth Center	2242 E Foothill Blvd	91107
	ArtCenter College of Design, 870 Building - Lobby Area	870 S Raymond Ave	91105
	Allendale Elementary School	1135 S Euclid Ave	91106
	Assistance League of Pasadena	820 E California Blvd	91106
Rosemead	Garvey Center, Frank G Tripei Room	9108 Garvey Ave	91770
	Rosemead Community Recreation Center, Multi-Purpose Room	3936 Muscatel Ave	91770
San Gabriel	San Gabriel Community Recreation Center, Dance Room	250 S Mission Dr	91766
	San Gabriel Library, Meeting Room	500 S Del Mar Ave	91776
South Pasadena	South Pasadena War Memorial, War Memorial Hall	435 Fair Oaks Ave	91030
	South Pasadena Public Library, Community Room	1115 El Centro St	91030

Please note that not all vote centers were listed at the initially distributed, printed guidebook of vote center locations. For instance, Allendale Elementary School and Assistance League of Pasadena were not listed under Pasadena in the guidebook. In addition, Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church was also not listed under Monterey Park. While the guidebook did specify that locations may change, it may be good to provide a QR code on the cover of the distributed guidebook to quickly access the updated list of vote centers.