IMPROVING ELECTION ADMINISTRATION WITH VOTE CENTERS: TOWARD A NATIONAL MODEL

Dr. Raymond H. Scheele
Dr. Joe Losco
Dr. Gary Crawley
Dr. Sally Jo Vasicko

The Bowen Center for Public Affairs
Department of Political Science
Ball State University
With eGov Partners, Inc.

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ABSTRACT

In 2003, Larimer County, Colorado, was the first jurisdiction to experiment with Vote Centers as an alternative to traditional precincts. Vote Center advocates argue that they have the potential to increase voter turnout by making voting more convenient as well as cutting the election costs by reducing the number of polling places. This study examines these two arguments by investigating the installation and operation of Vote Centers in three Indiana counties. Turnout rates are compared with control counties and through time. The impact of early voting in 2008 also is examined along with the question of whether Vote Centers cut the costs of election administration. Finally, elements of a model are specified for use by counties considering adopting Vote Centers as an alternative to traditional precincts.

Introduction and Background: Vote Centers vs. Traditional Precincts

Sometimes referred to as "super precincts" Vote Centers replace traditional precinct polling places, permitting voters to cast a ballot at any Vote Center location in the county. Vote Centers are made possible because information technologies have matured such that sufficient capabilities exist to securely support them without being prohibitively expensive. The 2002 federal law known as the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) required each state to create and maintain a statewide voter registration system. Indiana's HAVA-mandated statewide voter registration system (SVRS) is hosted by the Election Division of the office of the Indiana Secretary of State. According to the federal act, the main purpose of statewide voter registration systems was to implement in each state "a single, uniform, official, centralized, interactive computerized statewide voter registration list defined, maintained, and administered at the State level that contains the name and registration information of every legally registered voter in the State and assigns a unique identifier to each legally registered voter in the State."

Vote Centers use a network of computers that access a single "electronic poll book"

(EPB) as the control mechanism for the voting process. This mechanism has two crucial

attributes:

1.   A potentially large number of small voting places, i.e., precincts, can be
                consolidated into a significantly smaller number of large polling places,
i.e.,   Vote Centers;

2.   Voters are free to vote at any facility within their county since their request for a
        ballot can be recorded in real time in a central system, accessible by all election
        workers and administrators from any location, thus preventing a voter from
        subsequently voting at another location.

As with its paper analog, primary functions of an electronic poll book are to:

1.   Confirm a voter's eligibility to cast a ballot (i.e., they are a registered voter);
2.   Identify the election contests for which a voter may vote (i.e., ballot form);
3.   Record that the voter has cast a ballot.

Without a computer network accessible to poll workers and election officials that allows

the searching and updating of names of registered voters, Vote Centers would not be possible.

Vote Centers were first implemented in Larimer County, Colorado, in 2003 when 143

precinct polling places were converted into just 22 Vote Centers. The center locations, mostly in

urban settings, were chosen for their convenience to work and shopping, the availability of large

parking facilities, and accessibility for the disabled. All Vote Centers were linked via the

Internet to servers that maintained electronic poll books for all registered county voters. The poll

book was updated in real time so that poll workers would know if a prospective voter had

already cast a ballot at another location. Larimer County officials reported that the use of Vote

Centers yielded an increase in voter turnout and a reduction in the number of poll workers

needed to manage the election. In 2007, widespread problems with Denver's electronic voting

machines forced some Colorado officials to rethink the use of electronic voting, but the use of

Vote Centers is expected to expand and Larimer County remains a proponent. Other states experimenting with Vote Centers include Indiana, Florida, Ohio, Tennessee and Texas.

In 2005, the Indiana Secretary of State, Todd Rokita, led a delegation of state and local officials to Larimer County to observe Vote Centers during an actual election. All who attended were impressed and in the 2006 Indiana legislature House Bill 1011 authorized the Secretary of State to select up to three counties to run pilot Vote Center programs in the 2007 municipal elections and the 2008 primary and general elections. Two counties were selected by the Secretary of State from applications submitted to his office: Tippecanoe County and Wayne County. Wayne County held a municipal primary on May 8, 2007, in the City of Richmond where Vote Centers were first used. On that same day Tippecanoe County did not have a primary election because no offices had contested races for nominations in either of the two municipalities of Lafayette or Wet Lafayette. Election officials, however, did conduct a mock election to test some of the Vote Center procedures and operations they would implement in the 2007 general election. Both counties continued with the Vote Centers in the May 6, 2008, Indiana primary election and the November 4, 2008, general election. A third county, Cass, was permitted to use Vote Centers in the 2008 elections.

Little scholarly work has been conducted to explore the effects of Vote Centers. However, there is evidence that accessibility to polling places does have an impact on turnout (Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003; Haspel and Knotts, 2005; Dyck and Gimpel, 2005). The few studies conducted on Vote Centers indicate that their utilization has a modest positive impact on turnout among younger, infrequent voters and those who have not yet developed the voting habit (Stein and Vonnahme, 2008). It is also estimated that Vote Centers may have a cumulative

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effect in spurring long term increases in voting among those first attracted by Vote Centers (Stein, Leighley, and Owens, 2005; Stein and Vonnahme, 2006).

Two key arguments are made in support of Vote Centers. First, it is argued that Vote Centers will increase turnout by freeing voters to cast their ballots at a number of locations convenient to where they work and shop instead of limiting them to one precinct polling place in their neighborhoods. Second, there are assertions that Vote Centers will reduce the governmental costs of administering elections because fewer poll workers will be required to staff the limited number of Vote Centers than the more numerous neighborhood-polling places. This paper focuses on two key questions: whether Vote Centers have an impact on voter turnout; and whether or not Vote Centers result in cost savings as compared to traditional precincts. Finally, to assist election administrators who are considering adopting Vote Centers, we set forth certain elements of a model to follow if election officials in other jurisdictions are considering adopting Vote Centers.

This study was launched in 2007. Indiana has a Municipal Election every four years following the mid-term elections. Most cities and small towns have their offices on the ballot, which includes mayor, city (or town) council members, city clerk or clerk-treasurer, and city judge. As indicated, only Wayne County had primary contests in 2007. Tippecanoe County, located approximately 60 miles northwest of Indianapolis, includes the cities of Lafayette and West Lafayette. The countywide population is about 156,000, ranking 9th in Indiana. Wayne County is located approximately 75 miles east of Indianapolis, on the Indiana/Ohio border, with the largest city being Richmond. Its population was 68,846 in 2006, 24th largest in Indiana. For Municipal elections in 2007, Tippecanoe County consolidated 91 precincts into 22 Vote Centers;

Wayne County collapsed the previous 31 precincts in the City of Richmond into just 4 Vote Centers.

In this study the two Vote Center counties were paired with two control counties that used traditional precincts and also matched the Vote Center counties closely in population demographics. Tippecanoe County, the home of the main campus of Purdue University was matched with Monroe County, the home of the main campus of Indiana University. Wayne County, with the county seat being Richmond, was matched with Bartholomew County, with the county seat being Columbus.

Do Vote Centers Increase Voter Turnout?

The issue of whether Vote Centers would increase voter turnout by making voting more convenient was explored in these Indiana cities following the 2007 municipal elections. (Scheele, Losco, Crawley, Vasicko, 2008). The major conclusion was that Indiana Vote Centers "had a minimal impact on turnout and that competitiveness [of contests] continues to be a strong factor in explaining turnout rates." (pp. 8-9). This conclusion rested on the finding that there was no significant difference in turnout between the previous municipal elections in 2003, when traditional precincts were used, and 2007, when Vote Centers were used, after controlling for competitive races. One city, West Lafayette, in Tippecanoe County, experienced an increase in turnout in 2007, but that increase was matched in a control county with a competitive race.

Voter turnout was examined again in the 2008 May primary. Focusing on the two Vote Center counties, it was clear that turnout was going to surge over the 2004 Indiana primary because of the hotly contested race for the Democratic presidential nomination and the prominent role that Indiana was playing in that contest.

The following table shows the increased turnout in Tippecanoe and Wayne counties by comparing the turnout in the May, 4, 2004, primary to the turnout in the May 6, 2008, primary. The two control counties are included in the table: Bartholomew and Monroe.

VOTER TURNOUT IN VOTE CENTER AND CONTROL COUNTIES
PRIMARY ELECTIONS, 2004 AND 2008

| | Voters Voting | | % Turnout of Registered Voters | |
	2004	2008	2004	2008
Bartholomew Co.	13,109	19,196	27%	37%
Wayne Co.	10,845	17,016	21%	33%
Monroe Co.	14,002	34,054	14%	45%
Tippecanoe Co.	15,176	39,832	18%	44%

NOTE: The 2008 figures are unofficial.

At first glance these figures tend to confirm the finding from the 2007 Vote Center report. The presence of Vote Centers as compared to counties with traditional precincts does not, by itself, spur voter turnout. As a percent of registered voters, the control counties are very similar to the Vote Center counties.

When voter turnout is calculated by dividing the number of voters by the number of registered voters the result is only, at best, a very rough estimate of the percent of voters who turned out. The list of registered voters is not a list of eligible voters because the registered voter list is not routinely cleaned to remove persons who have died, moved, or otherwise been disenfranchised. Indiana County Clerks have wide discretion in terms of the timetable to remove

individuals from the voter registration roles. For example, Wayne County officials planned to remove the names of registered voters if a postcard mailed to each registered voter was returned by the post office as undeliverable. This task was not performed because of lack of staff and time. In Tippecanoe County, approximately 15,000 postcards were mailed to voters prior to the May 6 primary and were returned as undeliverable. Thus, the number of registered voters is inflated. When the actual numbers of voters are compared in the table, the Vote Center counties actually increased slightly more from 2004 to 2008 than did the control counties.

The unofficial statewide turnout on May 6, 2008, was 40 percent. Wayne County fell seven percent below the statewide average at 33 percent while Tippecanoe County was above the statewide average at 44 percent.   Again, however, other confounding variables affected turnout. In Tippecanoe, there were four contested races on the ballot at the county level whereas there was only one such race in Wayne. Also, the Tippecanoe County turnout was very close to the turnout of the control county, Monroe. Tippecanoe is the home of the main campus of Purdue University and Monroe is the home of the main campus of Indiana University. Some of the surge in voting in these two counties is undoubtedly attributable to Barack Obama's candidacy, which targeted younger voters. He carried both Tippecanoe and Monroe counties, garnering 58 percent of the vote in the former and 67 percent in the latter. On the other hand, Hillary Clinton carried both Wayne County (59%) and Bartholomew County (53%).

Another indicator that the Democratic race for the presidential nomination was the critical variable affecting turnout is the number of voters requesting Democratic ballots on May 6. Over 73 percent of the voters in Tippecanoe County requested Democratic ballots and nearly 67 percent did so in Wayne County. In the three previous presidential primaries, in 2004, 2000 and 1996, only 23 percent of the Tippecanoe County voters chose Democratic ballots. Likewise,

in Wayne County, Republican voters in the previous presidential primary elections outnumbered Democrats by nearly a two-to-one margin. In 2008, however, this ratio was reversed.

The statewide Indiana voter turnout in the 2008 November election rose 4.5 percentage points, from 54.8 percent in 2004 to 59.4 percent in 2008. These figures are based on the voting eligible population (VEP). (McDonald, 2008).

The following chart shows the 2008 turnout and election results for the three Vote Center counties and the three control counties. These figures are based on the number of registered voters in the state, according to the official figures from the Indiana Secretary of State, not on the VEP.   The range in turnout based on registered voters among all ninety-two Indiana counties was from a low of 49 percent to a high of 79 percent. Both of these figures are from counties that used traditional precincts.

Vote Center County	Turnout	Pres. Winner/Margin	Control County	Turnout	Pres. Winner/Margin
Cass	72%	McCain 53%	Jackson	59%	McCain 56%
Tippecanoe	67%	Obama 55%	Monroe	70%	Obama 66%
Wayne	56%	McCain 51%	Bartholomew	59%	McCain 55%

The statewide average turnout by number of registered voters in the 2008 general election was 62 percent, which is very close to the estimated national turnout of 61.6 percent.   Obama won the presidential race in Indiana, receiving 1,374,039 votes to McCain's 1,345,648, for a winning percentage of the two-party vote of 50.52 percent. (Indiana Secretary of State 2008 final results, January 14, 2009).[1]

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[1] Turnout figures for the 2008 general election differ slightly depending on when the data were reported. Some official turnout figures for some states were still pending as of late January, 2009. The data for Indiana are the official turnout figures reported and updated on January 14, 2009.

When the turnout averages of the Vote Center counties are compared with the control counties, the previous turnout findings are reconfirmed. The mere presence of Vote Centers does not in and of itself increase turnout by making voting more convenient as compared to traditional precincts. This finding corresponds to the findings cited in the "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections" which reported on survey responses during Super Tuesday of the primary election season. The authors found that "97% of respondents found it "very easy" or "fairly easy" to find their polling place on Super Tuesday (or in early voting)." (Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, p. 12). Vote Centers make it possible to stop at any polling place in the county to cast your ballot on Election Day, but this convenience factor is not substantial enough to attract a large number of citizens who have not voted regularly in the past. Our data clearly show, however, that Vote Centers certainly do not depress voter turnout, even in those elections where Vote Centers are initially used and the change may confuse or discourage some voters.

Another factor that can increase turnout is voter mobilization efforts by political parties and candidates. In 2008 Indiana was targeted by the Obama campaign. Obama and his spouse visited Indiana over 40 times in 2008. Indiana exit polls showed that Obama carried 88 percent of the Democratic identifiers, with McCain carrying 86 percent of the Republicans. The race was won among the independents where Obama won 54 percent to 43 percent. He carried both the large city and small city voters and narrowly lost the suburbs (45% to 54%). The rural areas favored McCain 55 percent to 44 percent. (Exit Polls, *New York Times*, December 9, 2008). Unfortunately, there are no published exit polls for Indiana in 2004.

The history of voter turnout in Indiana reveals growing numbers of voters, much of which can be attributed to population growth. Beginning in 1920, the first presidential election

following women's suffrage, Indiana has seen an increase in turnout in 17 of 23 presidential

elections. The six elections in which turnout declined are comprised of the two elections during

and after World War II (1944 and 1948) and the uncompetitive presidential elections in 1964,

1984, 1988 and 1996.[2] Again, competitive elections, and candidate and voter mobilization

efforts to get voters to the polls appear to impact turnout more than the presence of Vote Centers.

This finding is corroborated by the final report on the 2008 General Election from the

Tippecanoe County Board of Elections and Registrations where it is noted that "It would be

tempting to declare that Vote Centers were responsible for the turnout in this election but it

would be more accurate to say that the races on the ballot were responsible for the high voter

turnout." (Board of Elections and Registration. 2008. *Tippecanoe County General Election*

2008. p. 4).

Another aspect of the voter mobilization efforts in Indiana is the surge in early voting.

Similar to the Obama tactic in other battleground states, his campaign encouraged people to vote

early. This message was delivered both in paid advertising as well as through local Obama

campaign offices, which sponsored free rides to courthouses where early voting occurs.[3] In Vote

Center counties early voting was a major factor. The following chart shows the percent of voters

in the Vote Center counties who voted early.

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[2]   In the 1972 landslide reelection of President Richard Nixon, the Indiana turnout was essentially flat as compared to 1968, with only 1,932 more voters statewide showing up in 1972 than in 1968.

[3] Under Indiana law early voting can occur in the county office of the Circuit Court Clerk and "satellite offices" can be established by unanimous vote of the local election board. Specific locations must be specified and hours established. See IC 3-11-10-26.3.

Early Voting in Vote Center Counties, November, 2008

Vote Center County	Voters Voting	Early Voters	Percent
Cass	16,017	10,675	66.6%
Tippecanoe	69,574	30,796	44.3%
Wayne	29,085	4,333	14.9%

NOTE: The Cass and Wayne County "early voters" include the regular absentee voters as well as in-person early voters at Vote Centers. The Tippecanoe "early voters" are all in-person at the Vote Centers.

These figures show great variation among the three counties in early voters. The statewide average of all early voters comprised of in-person early voters, regular absentees (by mail) and by the traveling "sick board," was 23.6 percent of all voters voting. (McDonald, 2008. *(Nearly) Final 2008 Early Voting Statistics*). Cass and Tippecanoe Counties were significantly higher than the statewide average. Wayne County, however, was substantially below the statewide average. One explanation is that Wayne County operated only three early voting Vote Centers, one of which was in the county courthouse in downtown Richmond. Cass and Tippecanoe counties had more sites, with Tippecanoe opening Vote Centers for nine hours a day for nine days, beginning Saturday, October 25, at three major grocery stores as well as Faith Community Center. Cass operated seven Vote Centers. Of the 30,796 early in-person voters in Tippecanoe County, 76.9 percent, or 23,687 voted at these four early Voting Centers. These Tippecanoe County Vote Centers were open on Sundays, as well. Clearly, the Tippecanoe County experience shows that placement of early voting sites with extended hours in areas of high traffic will attract citizens to vote early. The 2008 general election report from Tippecanoe County states: "The grocery store locations were very popular."

When 2008 early voting rates are compared with the 2007 early voting rates in the municipal elections, Tippecanoe County increased substantially, from 30 percent to 44.3 percent.

Wayne County, on the other hand, markedly declined from 44.8 percent to only 14.9 percent. The surge in Tippecanoe County was undoubtedly fueled by the better placement of early voting sites and the longer open times. Wayne County maintained the same number of early voting sites, and although their total number of early voters more than doubled (from 2,115 to 4,333), the much higher 2008 turnout decreased the percentage of early voters. It appears early voting will increase by making early voting more convenient in terms of the number and locations of Vote Centers, as well as continuing to remind citizens of the early voting opportunity.

The Indiana data clearly indicate that early voting will increase with Vote Centers as compared to traditional precincts if the Vote Centers are located in high traffic areas for an extended period of days before the election. In this case, the advantage of Vote Centers over traditional precincts (in which early voting, of course, could take place) is that a citizen can stop at any convenient Vote Center prior to Election Day, whereas in counties with early voting at precincts, voters would still be required to appear at that precinct polling place. An additional advantage of Vote Centers is that they have the ability of being able to support "mobile" voting sites. Voting machines with the proper technical equipment for accessing the SVRS could be placed in trailers that could be stationed and moved to high pedestrian traffic locations prior to Election Day. In all likelihood this innovation also would add to the number of early voters.

Do Vote Centers Save Money?

This section examines cost comparisons between Vote Centers and traditional precincts. The Indiana experience is for counties to move from traditional neighborhood precinct polling places to Vote Centers. But even this process presents challenges in determining what, if any, savings are realized. Differences in financial practices from one county to the next constitute a major challenge. Accounting differences range from the effort to isolate election-related expenses to the degree of detail with which those expenses are captured. What constitutes a single expense line-item in County A may be divided into multiple lines for County B and may be lumped into a broader operational account in County C. Another factor is that election officials have considerable latitude in how they implement elections – especially with Vote Centers – and many of the choices they make affect costs.

This section focuses on the cost comparisons between using Vote Centers or traditional precincts. The first such cost comparison was performed by the staff of the Board of Elections and Registration in Tippecanoe County when they assessed the costs of using Vote Centers in the municipal general election of 2007 versus the costs they would have expected to incur had they stayed with precincts. The report states that:

> Some of the cost savings are obvious; fewer polling places means fewer poll workers are needed. In a conventional precinct election for the 2007 Municipal elections, we would have had 260 poll workers; we needed 142 [with Vote Centers]. (The actual head count is slightly higher, some workers split shifts.) Obviously, we also then spent less on training and meals.
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> We also spent considerably less on part-time labor and spent nothing on overtime. Part-time labor would have been expended for providing in-office absentee voting and overtime for our in-office workers who worked on Saturday. Since we had three satellite locations open on Saturday, the Election Board decided not to open the Courthouse for voting on Saturdays. There would have been additional costs in a precinct election because security and maintenance crews were not required on the two Saturdays before the election. No attempt has been made to quantify these costs.
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> Equipment transportation increased with Vote Centers because we were also moving computers. The cost of mailing the postcards to each registered voter was expensive (especially since about 11% of them were returned as undeliverable) but necessary.

We also spent a significant amount of money on voter outreach; we were very fortunate in that we had a source of funds that permitted us to advertise on the radio and do direct mailings. The one-time cost of developing the software and voter outreach costs were paid from other county budgets and are not included in the [following] table. The table shows the comparison between the cost of a precinct election and the cost of a Vote Center election. The costs associated with the Vote Center are actual expenses for 2007; the costs for the precinct election are estimates. (Tippecanoe County Board of Elections and Registration, "Tippecanoe Count Vote Centers 2007 Looking Forward to 2008," pp. 9-10).

As data in the table shows, during the first use of Vote Centers in Tippecanoe County in the 2007 municipal general elections in the cities of Lafayette and West Lafayette, twenty-two Vote Centers replaced what would have been fifty-two precinct-based polling places.

COST COMPARISON BETWEEN PRECINCT AND VOTE CENTER ELECTION
TIPPECANOE COUNTY, 2007 MUNICIPAL ELECTION

	Precincts	Vote Centers
Number of Polling places	52	22
Registered Voters	48,486	48,486
Number of Voters	16,080	16,080
Number of Poll Workers – Full-Time	260	96
Number of Poll Workers –Part-Time	0	21
Number of Greeters	0	25
Part-time Labor	$10,234	$ 3,271
Overtime	$ 1,400	0
Poll Workers	$35,620	$16,253
Election Day Workers	$ 1,871	$ 1,253
Traveling Board	$ 626	$ 297
Set-Up Crew	$ 459	$ 1,078
Satellite Absentee Workers	0	$ 7,503
Meals	$ 5,375	$ 3,677
Absentee Ballot Direct Costs	$ 2,710	$ 1,119
Printing Poll books (Direct Costs Only)	$ 1,782	0
Provisional Ballot Costs	$ 146	0
Rentals	$ 2,850	0
Equipment Transportation	$ 4,435	$ 5,200
Printing/Mailing Postcards	0	$12,465
Training	$ 7,500	$ 4,510
TOTAL	$75,008	$56,626
Cost Per Vote	$ 4.66	$ 3.52

Reducing the number of locations drove down total staffing levels for the election by nearly one-half (260 poll workers for the precincts and 142 for the Vote Centers, of which 21 of the poll workers were part-time). This staffing reduction had a ripple effect throughout most of the expense categories. It required less part-time labor to set-up and operate the Vote Centers; less cost to feed the Election Day workers; and it saved money on worker training. Expenses increased for Vote Centers in the areas of satellite (early voting) locations, equipment transportation--because of computer equipment--and the printing and mailing of postcards. Overall figures in the table indicate a savings of $18,382. On a "cost per vote," the precincts would have required $4.66 per voter as compared to the Vote Center's cost of $3.52. This amounts to a 24.5 percent savings.

In November, 2008, a similar cost comparison was made in Tippecanoe County and these data are displayed in the next chart. Having gained experience in the municipal elections of 2007 and the May 2008 primary, only 20 Vote Centers were needed to accommodate the entire county for the 2008 general election. These 20 Vote Centers replaced the 92 precinct polling places that would have been required under the traditional model. It was estimated that 582 poll workers would have been needed to staff the 92 traditional precincts in 2008, versus the 192 people actually used to support the 20 Vote Centers. A major factor in being able to reduce the number of Vote Centers to 20 was the realization that effective early voting effort with Vote Centers would reduce the long lines that would otherwise occur on Election Day in a high-turnout election. The following table breaks down the expenses and cost per vote is calculated on the basis of the 69,574 voters. With many more voters, the cost per vote decreased from the 2007 general election, but the total cost to staff the 20 Vote Centers in 2008 swelled from

$56,626 to $99,852 – an increase of more than 76 percent. On a cost per vote basis, the savings over using precincts amounted to 61 cents for every voter – almost 30% for this election.

Tippecanoe County – November 2008 – Vote Centers – 69,574 Voters

IMMEDIATE EXPENSES (direct costs per election)	Vote Centers (actual)	Traditional (estimated)	Vote Center (Cost /Vote)	Traditional (Cost/Vote)
Labor				
Poll workers	29,304	70,380	0.42	1.01
Assistant poll clerks	-	16,470	-	0.24
Election day office help	1,342	1,512	0.02	0.02
Satellite absentee workers	16,237	-	0.23	-
Part-time (incremental)	-	5,232	-	0.08
Overtime	2,475	1,616	0.04	0.02
Traveling Board	414	768	0.01	0.01
Sign Installers	76	-	0.00	-
Facilities				
Rentals	-	2,400	-	0.03
Internet	1,286	-	0.02	-
Other				
Absentee Ballots	6,110	12,555	0.09	0.18
Poll Books	-	2,145	-	0.03
Equipment Transportation	6,478	9,500	0.09	0.14
Postcards – Print & Mail	23,022	-	0.33	-
Training	8,830	11,800	0.13	0.17
Meals	4,277	8,280	0.06	0.12
Total	**99,852**	**142,658**	**1.44**	**2.05**

The cost savings reported by Tippecanoe County are confirmed from data provided by Cass County in the November, 2008, general election. The Cass County data are shown in the next chart. The expenses for the traditional precincts are estimates. Similar to Tippecanoe County, there were substantial reductions in staff and equipment in Cass County, with an even

more impressive estimated savings of 51.5 percent in direct expenses. On a cost-per-vote basis, Cass County realized a savings of $1.92 per voter.

Cass County – November 2008 – Vote Centers – 16,017 Voters

IMMEDIATE EXPENSES (direct costs per election)	Vote Centers (actual)	Traditional (estimated)	Vote Center (Cost /Vote)	Traditional (Cost/Vote)
Labor				
Poll workers	3,175	23,000	0.20	1.44
Election day office help	200	400	0.01	0.02
Satellite absentee workers	9,300	4,000	0.58	0.25
Part-time (incremental)	1,785	1,700	0.11	0.11
Traveling Board	1,372	1,200	0.09	0.07
Other (set-up)	1,750	7,000	0.11	0.44
Facilities				
Rentals	250	1,000	0.02	0.06
Other				
Supplies	1,638	7,000	0.10	0.44
Poll Books	(in supplies)	2,500		0.16
Equipment Transportation	100	2,500	0.01	0.16
Postcards – Printing, Mailing	6,030	0	0.38	0.00
Training	1,200	3,000	0.07	0.19
Meals	1,200	4,000	0.07	0.25
Legal Notices	1,000	2,500	0.06	0.16
Total	**29,000**	**59,800**	**1.81**	**3.73**

It is important to note that the costs pertaining to the early voting Vote Centers are also included. But certain "long-term expenses" are omitted. These long-term expenses include the cost of acquiring voting machines and ballot encoders. The cost of purchasing voting machines would have been incurred even with precinct polling places. In the 2008 November election in

Tippecanoe County there was an additional charge of $1,286 to establish high-speed Internet connections at some of the Vote Centers.

Clearly, a significant cost advantage is that staffing of Vote Centers can be tailored to expected turnout. Tippecanoe County started with the premise that each Vote Center had a supervisor (under the old precinct system called an "inspector") and a lead judge from the opposite party.[4] The supervisors in Tippecanoe County were Republicans and the lead judges were Democrats. These individuals had to be present all day in their assigned Vote Center. All other staff members could work shorter shifts, as needs and resources dictated.

Another approach to analyzing comparative election expenses is to focus on individual expenditure items. For example, the expense associated with printing and mailing postcards to each registered voter in a Vote Center county can comprise close to half of the non-personnel costs of conducting the election. When comparing models, it is assumed that postcards are not required for an election where polling places are precinct-based, but in fact they are also not required for Vote Center elections – as long as a satisfactory means of capturing voter signatures is in place. In addition to being a mechanism to capture each voter's signature, postcards also serve to remind voters when and where to vote and are useful for maintaining voter rolls in years when they qualify for the non-discriminatory mailing under the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter).   An expense that is not usually reported for traditional precincts is the cost of printing poll books that are used by election clerks to verify that a voter is registered and to capture the signature of that voter. Several copies of poll books are printed and distributed and these costs can partially offset the expense of printing and mailing Vote Center postcards.

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[4] IC 3-6-6-8 specifies that "The county chairman of the major political party whose candidate for the office of secretary of state received the highest vote in the county at the last election may nominate a voter for the office of inspector." The Republican candidate for secretary of state in the last election carried Tippecanoe County.

Another individual expenditure item is rental costs. In Tippecanoe County the costs for renting buildings for Vote Centers were zero, since only 20 physical facilities were needed and all 20 locations that were used were either public buildings for which no (direct) costs were incurred or other buildings donated for Election Day use. However, if 92 precinct polling places had been needed on Election Day, some rental costs would have had to be budgeted. Figures from Tippecanoe County show that costs of bringing Internet access to the Vote Centers were about one-half the rental costs that would be needed if traditional precincts would have remained in place.

By far the most expensive component of conducting either a precinct-based or Vote Center election is personnel. Total labor expenses required to conduct an election can be isolated to each individual election (excluding the cost of permanent election staff) and represents a significant expense category. Tippecanoe County had 69,574 voters for the November 2008 election and total labor expenses comprised almost exactly <u>half</u> of all direct expenses for the election:

- $ 49,848 ($0.72 per voter) under the Vote Center model;

- $ 95,978 ($1.38 per voter) estimated if using a precinct-based model.

The differences in these labor expense totals can be attributed to staff utilization. Staff deployment and utilization is much less efficient across 92 precinct-based polling sites than in the 20 larger Vote Centers. In this case, the average number of voters served by a poll worker was raised to 460 using Vote Centers, compared to 119 using precincts, with no apparent loss of quality or voter satisfaction.

One complicating factor in staffing polling places in Indiana and in many other states is state laws requiring representation of individuals from both major political parties as poll

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workers in each precinct polling place or Vote Center. Under Indiana law, the county election board appoints precinct workers, but the county chairman of each of the major political parties is entitled to appoint an election judge for each polling place, as well as poll clerks, assistant poll clerks, and election sheriffs."[5] When Vote Centers are in operation, Indiana law allows the county election board also to appoint one or more "greeters" for each Vote Center.[6] The role of political parties in the administration of polling places is becoming a problem as fewer and fewer individuals are available for nomination by the county chairs of the two major parties. Moreover, even when individuals are nominated for positions, they often fail to follow through on their responsibilities. In Indiana's largest county, Marion, in the 2007 municipal primary, five precinct polling places did not open on Election Day because poll workers did not show up. Moreover, in a few instances in Vote Center counties, where the county election board has authority to assign workers to the respective centers, the political party chairs requested certain of their workers be assigned to certain locations, thereby asserting partisan pressure on the staffing of the Vote Centers. Indiana law does allow the county election board to disqualify a poll worker if he or she fails to attend any required training.[7] This provision, of course, does not prevent a worker from being absent or late on Election Day.

Taking the discussion of poll workers one step further, dealing with part-time employees is one of the great challenges to effectively executing an election. Recruiting, tracking, training, deploying, supporting, and compensating 70 percent fewer people significantly eases the preparation required for a successful election. It also permits election officials to maintain a higher-quality pool of poll worker candidates across successive elections.

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[5] See IC 3-6-6.
[6] See IC 3-11-18-15.
[7] See IC 3-6-6-7(5).

Expenses related to in-person early voting differ greatly depending on the state laws that govern the early voting process. Our data show that in-person early-voting at Vote Centers increases turnout during the early voting period, thereby relieving pressure on Election Day facilities caused by long lines. Consequently, some costs for staffing and maintaining early voting locations in Vote Center counties are offset by having more efficient processing of voters on Election Day.

In addition to the direct costs of conducting a specific election, it is important to quantify long-term costs spread over multiple elections. For comparative analysis, a portion of these long-term costs should be allocated to each election. Most important among these is the cost of voting equipment, which may include ballot encoding machines, depending on the type of voting machines used. As with poll workers, a higher utilization is possible for voting machines when they are deployed across fewer and larger voting locations. Because voting equipment is expensive, total differences in equipment expense allocation can be significant.

In the case of $5,000 voting machines, if we assume they can be used for 10 elections (a $500 per machine per election cost) then increasing utilization from 165 to 230 voters per machine means that a county that expects 100,000 voters on Election Day can reduce the number of voting machines it must own by 170, a savings of $85,500 per election. Further expense avoidance associated with transportation, storage, and maintenance create significant additional opportunities for savings.

An expense category that cannot be ignored is the indirect cost associated with the switch to Vote Centers. Administrators should not count on significant savings in the first year because of start-up costs. Counties that have used traditional precincts for years have routinized start-up costs.

Cass County presents another perspective on the long-term savings of Vote Centers. Cass County had to purchase new voting machines for the 2008 elections because their previous vendor had gone out of business. Because Cass County was converting to Vote Centers, election administrators estimate that an additional investment of approximately $500,000 in election-related equipment would be required to revert back to a traditional precinct-based voting model. Using our assumption of equipment lasting for 10 elections, we can use this to attribute a further savings of $50,000 per election as a result of this county's use of Vote Centers.

The next chart presents expense data from one of our control counties, Bartholomew. This county owns 163 voting machines (193 voters per machine), purchased in 2005-2006, for a total investment of $570,500. Assuming ten elections per machine yields a long-term expense allocation of $57,050 per election for voting machines.

Bartholomew County – November 2008 – Traditional Polling Places – 31,516 Voters

IMMEDIATE EXPENSES (direct costs per election)	Units	Traditional (actual cost)	Traditional (Cost / Vote)
Labor			
Poll workers	285	30,760	0.98
Election day office help	21	3,600	0.11
Satellite absentee workers	6	19,165	0.61
Part-time (incremental)	2	2,484	0.08
Overtime	7	2,831	0.09
Traveling Board	14	10,435	0.33
Other – Computer Technicians	2	1,000	0.03
Other – Machines Technician	2	8,150	0.26
Facilities			
Rentals	18	900	0.06
Other			
Absentee Ballots (print own)	6,333	0	0.00
Provisional Ballots (print own)	1,005	0	0.00
Poll Books (print own)	67	0	0.00
Equipment Transportation	4	1,200	0.04
Training	231	2,310	0.07
Meals	285	4,275	0.14
Total		**87,110**	**2.76**

The Indiana data clearly show that operating Vote Centers instead of traditional precincts results in substantial savings. The largest savings come in reducing the number of poll workers needed to staff the voting sites. In terms of fixed costs, such as the costs of acquiring voting machines, these expenses can be substantially reduced with effective programs that properly sites Vote Centers and provides for early voting opportunities.

Elements of a National Model for Vote Centers

The Indiana experience has shown that there are certain key concepts and considerations one must understand and take into account before adopting Vote Centers:

1.   The Challenge of More Voters per Location.   While traditional polling places rarely serve more than a thousand Election Day voters (often considerably fewer) it is not unreasonable for a well-placed Vote Center to provide the opportunity to vote for 200-300 people per hour. For example, if the average voter spends 10 minutes in the Vote Center (i.e., minimal wait time) a Vote Center that sees 300 people in an hour will always have an average of 50 voters in it, in addition to poll workers and observers. Vehicles for all of these individuals will be parked outside. Locating Vote Centers can be greatly facilitated by the use of GIS technology. A preliminary study conducted by the Ball State research team showed that the vast majority of voters continued to vote at Vote Center locations closest to their homes. Future studies will attempt to capture more information about voter preferences and plot them with GIS technology.

2. The Challenge of Forecasting Turnout. Since Vote Centers are not precinct-based, they are open to the broader voting population. This makes forecasting turnout of voters at any center difficult. Experience with Indiana Vote Centers indicates that voter turnout at similarly-located centers can vary widely from one election to the next and across hours of the day – busy in the afternoon one election, then more voters in the morning for the next. When considering how many Vote Centers to use and where to locate them, election planners must understand they should prepare to accommodate the busiest hour of the day at any facility. Unlike traditional polling places, the larger facilities needed to host a Vote Center can be difficult to locate and reserve for Election Day. Schools, for

example, are appealing facilities, but often will not tolerate the disruptions that come with such a significant commitment.

State laws may dictate a minimum number of Vote Centers for a county. For example, the states of Colorado and Indiana both require at least one Vote Center for every 10,000 active registered voters. Beyond the legal requirements, turnout forecasting must take into account the likelihood that well-funded campaigns and competitive races on the ballot may swell turnout over previous elections. Turnout data from previous years must be collected and analyzed. The Indiana evidence shows that the mere presence of Vote Centers does not, by itself, spur turnout. However, when Vote Centers are used for early voting and are positioned properly, more voters will take advantage of the early voting period, thereby relieving pressure on Vote Centers on Election Day.

3. More Computer Technology Required. Vote Centers require significant use of computer technology to interrogate a centralized database to validate voters' registration and to record that each voter has voted. A reliable network (typically Internet) connection is needed, with sufficient bandwidth and, if possible, some backup connection capability. Electrical power requirements at these facilities can also be significant–Vote Centers require more voting machines than traditional polling places, to which computers, printers, and often ballot card encoding machines must be added. If a facility is not equipped to support the total power requirements of all the computers and voting equipment needed to support peak voter arrival rates, blown circuits will severely handicap Vote Center operations, up to the point of closing the Vote Center until computer connections can be restored.

4. <u>High Efficiency Required for Cost Savings.</u> The principal advantages of Vote Centers are greater efficiency and overall cost-savings. In general, savings result from greater utilization of workers and equipment, which means more voters are processed per poll worker. The challenge is to understand that Vote Center processes must be highly efficient. If the Vote Center is designed to accommodate many more voters per hour and the process breaks down, lines of waiting voters can grow quickly. Reasons why processes can fail should be anticipated, identified clearly and back-up procedures should be developed. For this reason, Vote Centers typically require that the person in the Supervisor role devote a significant portion of their time to operational management on Election Day.

5. <u>New Training Materials Required.</u> Vote Centers require more specialized computer skills for some workers and more training for all workers. Some new positions will be created, such as "greeters," and these individuals will require training. Training for all workers is imperative since keeping voters flowing efficiently through the voting facility is essential to realizing the potential of Vote Centers. Revising training materials to incorporate information on the new computer technology and the differing functions of some of the vote stations will not require extensive time or effort. Moreover, the costs incurred in creating new training modules can be largely offset by having to maintain a smaller pool of skilled and reliable workers.

6. <u>Large-scale Public Information Campaign Required.</u> Fewer voting places will require a large-scale public information campaign to alert and inform voters of the new polling places and explain why the Vote Centers are being implemented. Costs will be incurred to reach citizens with this information. The largest new cost in the Indiana counties was

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the printing and mailing of postcards to all registered voters. The postcards informed the voters of the Vote Center locations and requested that voters bring the postcard with them when they vote. Each postcard was bar-coded and, when scanned, was an efficient method of verifying the voter's eligibility. The postcard communication with voters was accompanied by public service announcements on local media and by news coverage by media outlets.

7. The Challenge of Forecasting Costs. This paper contains examples of election expenses from multiple counties, both using vote centers and using precinct-based polling places. Analysis of the cost of elections in light of the vote center concept merits significant further examination. Unusual expenses associated with the transition to vote centers may be significant, such as acquisition of computer technology (to accommodate the check-in process) and voting equipment (to support ballot-on-demand) and development of new processes, each likely to require updates to documentation and training materials. Expect that fewer voting machines will be required than were for precinct-based polling places, which may create opportunities for redeployment to other jurisdictions. Start-up costs associated with first use of vote centers include comprehensive communication with the community, such as use of various media and printing of post cards to mail to registered voters. By utilizing Vote Centers, direct costs will shift, largely based on the use of different technology (notably, printing expenses) and people and equipment can be better utilized (more voters per worker and per piece of equipment), driving down Election Day cost per voter.

In addition to the above, the physical layout of a Vote Center will depend on the configuration of the building in which the Vote Center is located. The shape and size of the

facilities will vary, of course, but it is important to have a standard layout to use in order to

optimize efficiency in processing voters. A diagram of a generic Vote Center is shown below

and is a slight variation on the layout used by Tippecanoe County, Indiana, in 2008. The

diagram depicts a simple Vote Center process using voter identification, postcards, and encoded

ballot cards to tell voting machines which ballot a voter is to receive. In this variation of the

Vote Center process, voters are required to provide identification to check-in. Postcards may be

mailed to voters, which is one of the optional steps that election planners may use in their

process and to facilitate communication before an election. These cards can be used to help poll

workers look up voters in the statewide voter registration system and to capture signatures. In

this case if a voter does

Generic Vote Center Flow – Using Voter ID, Postcards, and Encoded Ballot Cards
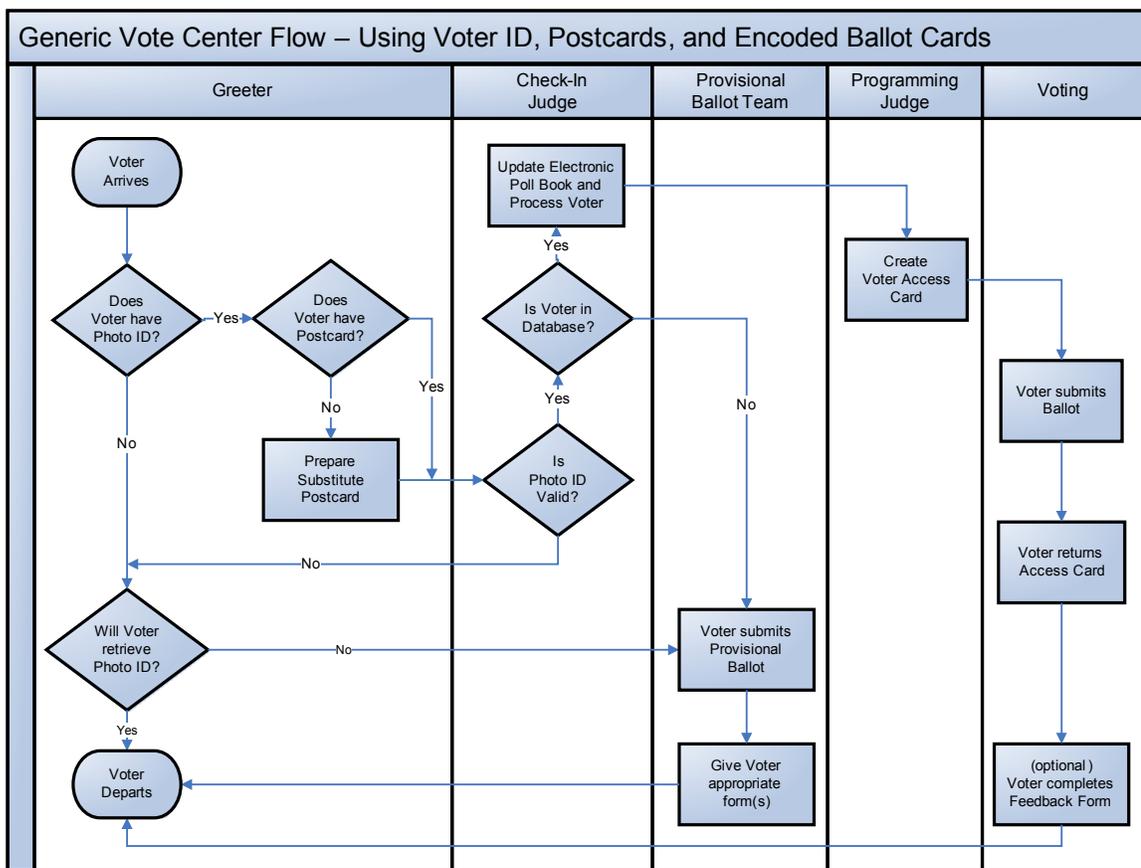
not bring their postcard, a substitute card can be provided at the Vote Center.

Some voting machines that support "ballots on demand" use encoded ballot cards to indicate to the machine the precinct in which the voter resides and this is represented in the diagram. Below is a representation of how a Vote Center may be organized. In this case using a separate entrance and exit for the facility is used to smooth traffic flow. Ballot encode machines are located after the check-in stations, but may also be integrated with the check-in step--a choice for election planners to consider.

The diagram's blue arrows show the standard path a voter follows, while the gray arrows indicate an alternate path, most often used if a provisional ballot is required.

Generic Vote Center Layout – Using Ballot Encoding Equipment
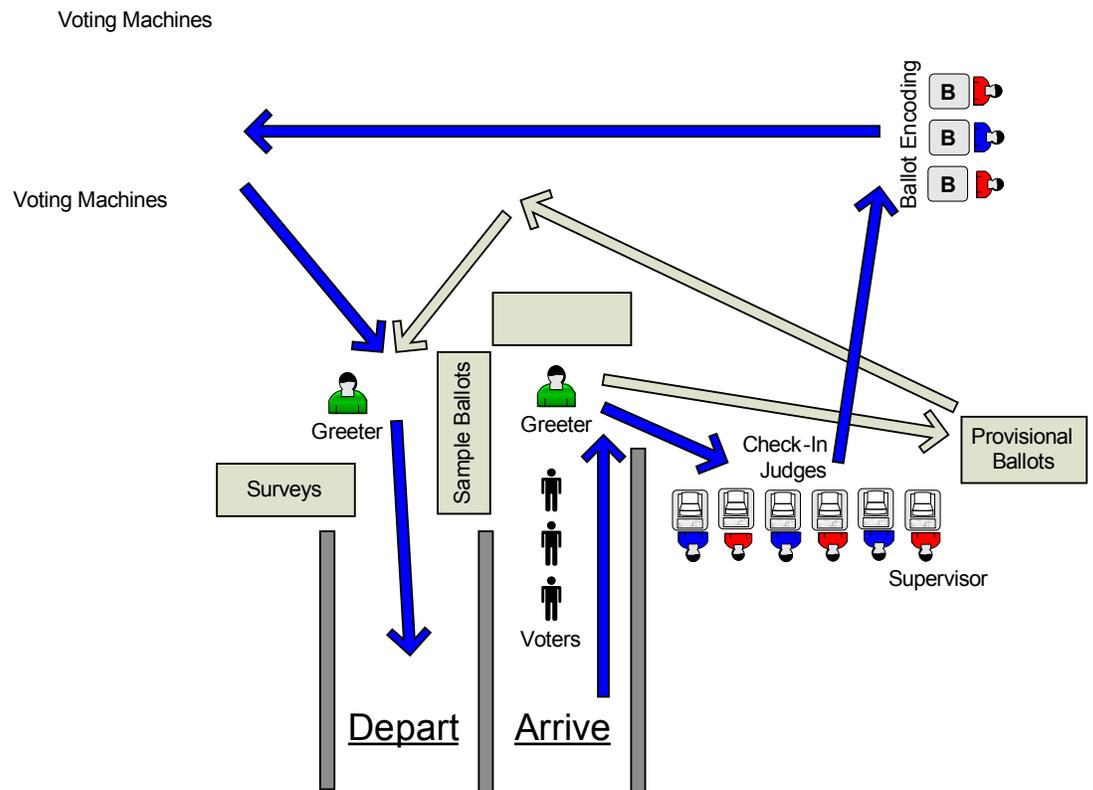
Each step in the Vote Center process requires well-trained staff members. There is an abundance of training materials available on the web to assist election administrators in revising their current training programs to incorporate the added skills needed for Vote Centers. A major difference in training between Vote Centers and traditional precincts is the expertise needed in operating the computer equipment that accesses the statewide voter registration system (SVRS). The technicians will be located at each Vote Center while voting is underway (both early voting and on Election Day), and a technician will be needed at the central administrative headquarters, as well, in order to trouble shoot any problems that might arise in the field.

The position of "Greeter" is also new. The Greeter is responsible for welcoming the voter and determining if he or she has the needed documentation (such as a photo ID, if required, or the postcard that was mailed to them). The Greeter directs the voter to the appropriate queue. An example of training materials for these positions can be obtained from the Tippecanoe County Board of Election and Registration. These training materials were created specifically for Vote Centers. The material is entitled "Election Manual, Vote Center Edition."

One cost advantage for Vote Centers is that fewer workers are required at the central election headquarters on Election Day. Fewer staff members are needed to answer phone inquiries from voters asking which precinct they are in and where their precinct polling place is located. Moreover, if the Vote Centers are properly provisioned there is virtually no need for central staffers to run additional forms to polling places because forms and documents are printed at the Vote Centers.

Summary and Conclusions

This evaluation of the installation and operations of Indiana Vote Centers over two election years has addressed two major assertions regarding Vote Centers: 1) by making

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voting more convenient Vote Centers will increase voter turnout, and 2) by consolidating precincts into Vote Centers, substantial cost savings will be realized in election administration.

Our findings show that, overall, the existence of Vote Centers, in and of themselves, do not increase voter turnout. Other factors, such as highly competitive electoral contests and well-financed and organized get-out-the-vote operations have much more to do with attracting more people to the polls. However, a major advantage of Vote Centers was uncovered when we examined early voting. By permitting registered voters to vote early at any Vote Center site—and by locating the early voting sites at high traffic areas such as grocery stores and shopping malls—a significant number of registered voters will take advantage and vote early. This surge in early voting reduces the pressure on polling sites on Election Day.

The data on the costs of holding elections clearly show that Vote Centers save money. Every jurisdiction, on a cost-per-vote basis, showed substantial savings over traditional precincts. The bulk of the savings are attributed to direct labor costs.

Finally, to assist election administrators who are considering adopting Vote Centers to replace traditional precincts, elements of a model are specified. The model is based on the Indiana experience and is designed to provide an overview as well as a roadmap for executing Vote Centers across America.

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