Place Matters: A Ground-Level Look at the Vote Center Experience

Anita Manion, University of Missouri-St. Louis
Jake Shaw, DePauw University
David Kimball, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Prepared for the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference
April 2026
Chicago, Illinois

Vote centers are an alternative to assigned local polling places, where jurisdictions host fewer voting locations but allow residents to vote at any location. This reform has expanded rapidly over the past few years, part of a broader trend toward polling place consolidation. We document the expansion of vote centers with a new database of all jurisdictions using Election Day vote centers. As of 2025, roughly 30 percent of the nation's registered voters live in one of the 625 local jurisdictions that provide Election Day vote centers. Vote centers are more common in large jurisdictions, and implementation typically means a substantial reduction in the number of polling places and poll workers, easing some of the burden on recruiting poll workers. We also find that local jurisdictions experience significant declines in provisional ballots and rejected provisional ballots after adopting vote centers. In the 2024 general election, voters at Election Day vote centers reported a somewhat less positive voting experience than other voters. However, in voter and poll worker surveys in two adopting jurisdictions we find very strong support for vote centers.

Introduction

This paper examines the implementation and performance of Election Day vote centers. Vote centers are an alternative to assigned local polling places, where jurisdictions host fewer voting locations but allow residents to vote at any location. Much of the existing research focuses on case studies and the earliest adopters of vote centers (e.g., Stein and Vonnahme 2008; Montjoy 2008). Meanwhile, this reform has expanded rapidly over the past few years during a period of polling place consolidation (Manion et al. 2023). At least 625 local jurisdictions, serving roughly 30 percent of the nation's registered voters, use vote centers for Election Day voting. However, we still lack considerable basic research on the performance of vote centers. A key part of our research is to create and maintain a database of local jurisdictions that have implemented vote centers, including the year of adoption. We then use this database and existing data sources to produce more comprehensive research on the impact of vote centers on local administration and voters. Our research fills a critical gap in the understanding of vote centers and will improve our capacity for future election administration research.

Local jurisdictions in at least 19 states now provide vote centers for Election Day voting, with most locations implementing this reform between 2020 and 2024. Vote centers are more common in large jurisdictions, which are more likely to have the staff and equipment necessary for successful vote center adoption. On average, jurisdictions implementing vote centers see a roughly 50 percent reduction in the number of Election Day polling places and a 30 percent reduction in the number of poll workers. As a result, vote center jurisdictions report greater ease in recruiting poll workers after adoption. We

also find a broad decline in the number of provisional ballots and rejected provisional ballots cast in vote center jurisdictions. In a national survey conducted after the 2024 election, voters at Election Day vote centers reported a somewhat less positive voting experience than other voters. However, in surveys of voters and poll workers in two adopting jurisdictions we find widespread support for vote centers.

Background

Most states now allow vote centers (particularly for early voting), where voters can choose to vote at one of several designated vote centers, instead of only being allowed to vote at an assigned polling place. The COVID-19 pandemic and financial pressures have accelerated the trend toward polling place consolidation, particularly in heavily populated counties (Persily and Stewart, 2021; Manion et al., 2023), and vote centers seem to be an appealing solution.

Adopting vote centers requires modern technology and coordinated changes in many elements of election administration. Like any significant election reform, making the shift to vote centers requires careful management of the interdependent functions of the election administration ecosystem (Hale et al., 2015; Huefner et al., 2007). When all of those changes are well-planned and executed, then the resulting voting experience proceeds pretty smoothly (Doyle 2008; Manion et al. 2023). When the shift to vote centers is not well-coordinated then the rollout can be messy, including long lines and dissatisfied voters (Montjoy 2008; Chen et al. 2021). Careful implementation of vote centers is very important.

More generally, adopting vote centers can reduce some election costs since vote centers require fewer polling places and poll workers and vote center technology tends to improve efficiency in ballot printing. Jones and Stein (2021) find that officials in jurisdictions with vote centers report less difficulty in recruiting poll workers than jurisdictions with assigned polling places. In particular, switching to vote centers tends to reduce costs associated with payroll, polling place rentals, and ballot printing (Scheele et al. 2009; Hall et al. 2012; Folz 2014; Stein 2016; Manion et al. 2023). However, those savings tend to be offset, to a lesser degree, by increased costs in other areas, like educating voters on the new system (Manion et al. 2023).

On balance, there is no clear impact of vote centers on voter turnout. On the one hand, adopting vote centers means fewer voting locations, which tends to lower voter turnout (Tomkins et al. 2022; Bitzer et al. 2023). On the other hand, the option of more voting locations rather than one assigned location offers some convenience to voters. Available evidence yields mixed results on the impact of vote centers on voter turnout. Some research finds that voter centers are associated with modest increases in turnout, primarily in lower turnout elections and among low propensity voters (Stein and Vonnahme 2008, 2012a; Hall et al. 2012; Bryant 2019; McGhee et al., 2019; Cortina and Rottinghaus 2019). Some carefully researched studies in California find slightly lower turnout in some elections in counties that adopted vote centers, while vote center voters traveled further to cast their ballots than voters at traditional polling places (Romero et al., 2019; McGhee 2025). Other studies find no effect of vote centers on voter turnout (Folz 2014; Scheele et al. 2009). Furthermore, turnout does not seem to

increase as voters gain more experience with vote centers (McGhee 2025). Vote centers do not have a consistent impact on voter turnout.

Adopting vote centers changes some administrative outcomes too. For example, vote centers are associated with significant reductions in provisional ballots and rejected provisional ballots (Scheele et al. 2009; Stein 2016; Romero, Meier, and Pavia 2022; Manion et al. 2023). One advantage of vote centers is that voters no longer need to appear at the correct polling place, and appearing at the wrong polling place is a common reason for casting a provisional ballot (U.S. EAC 2024). In some states, like California, vote centers are part of an expanded set of voting options, including in person early voting and absentee voting. As a result, vote centers are associated with increased early voting (Scheele et al. 2009), absentee voting (Stein 2016; Bryant 2019) or both (Romero, Meier, and Pavia 2022).

Like many election reforms, we do not know much about the impact of vote centers on the voting experience or voter trust in election results (Nyhan et al. 2023). The quality of the voting experience tends to be associated with voter confidence (Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Claassen et al. 2013; King 2020; Alvarez et al. 2021), and in-person voters tend to report higher levels of trust in election results than mail voters (Bryant 2020). Vote centers seem to be popular, at least in places where the rollout has been smooth. Some studies find that vote centers are associated with higher levels of voter confidence and satisfaction with the voting experience than precinct-based polling places (Stein and Vonnahme 2012b, 2014; Folz 2014; Scheele et al. 2009). We have conducted surveys of voters and poll workers in St. Louis County and Fresno County, CA, after the last two general elections. Both groups report very

positive experiences with vote centers. Over 70% of voters and over 90% of poll workers prefer to keep vote centers rather than switching back to assigned polling places (Bryant et al. 2024). However, research in California finds that voters of color were less likely to be aware of new voting procedures (Romero and Chami 2022). Not all voters experience vote centers in the same way, and vote centers may pose challenges for voters with limited access to transportation. Much of the research on vote centers examines early adopters or single locations. We hope to add to the evidence base with a more comprehensive examination of all local jurisdictions in the United States.

Jurisdictions Using Vote Centers

The use of vote centers is expanding quickly. We compiled a database of all local jurisdictions that use vote centers for Election Day voting. As of 2025, at least 625 counties (serving over 69 million registered voters, roughly 30 percent of the nation's electorate) in 19 states have adopted vote centers for Election Day voting. Figure 1 presents the year of adoption (the first general election) for local jurisdictions that use vote centers for Election Day voting. As the graph shows, the number of adopters has increased over time, and there is a surge of implementation after the COVID-19 pandemic. Most jurisdictions adopted Election Day vote centers in 2020 or after.

Figure 1. Most counties adopted vote centers recently (since 2020)

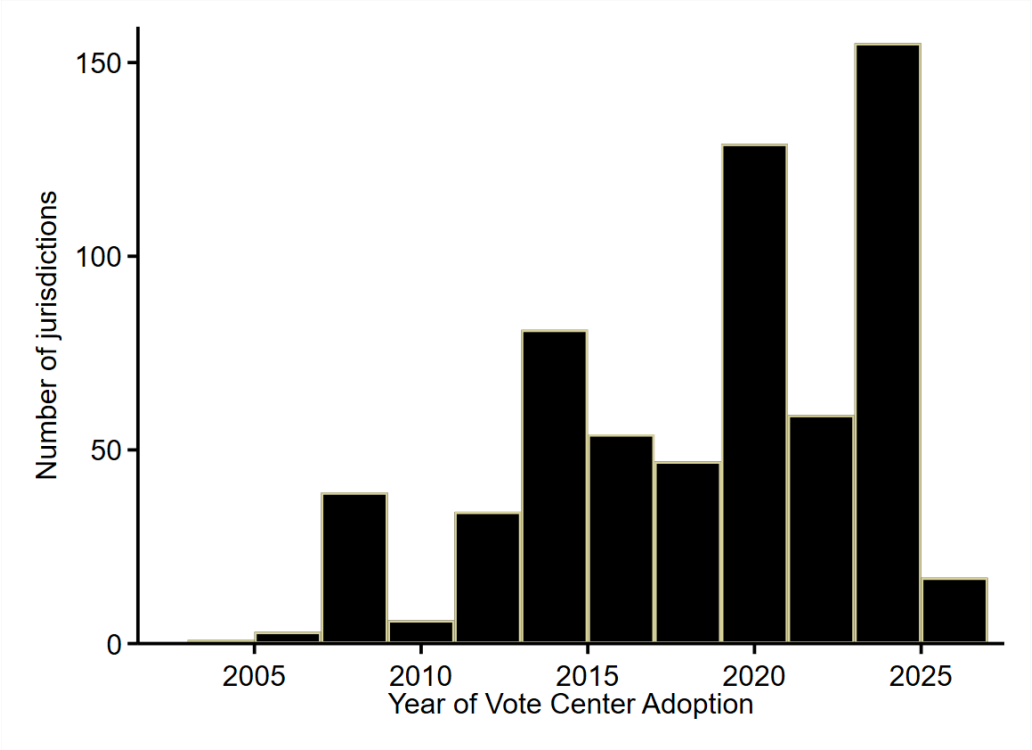
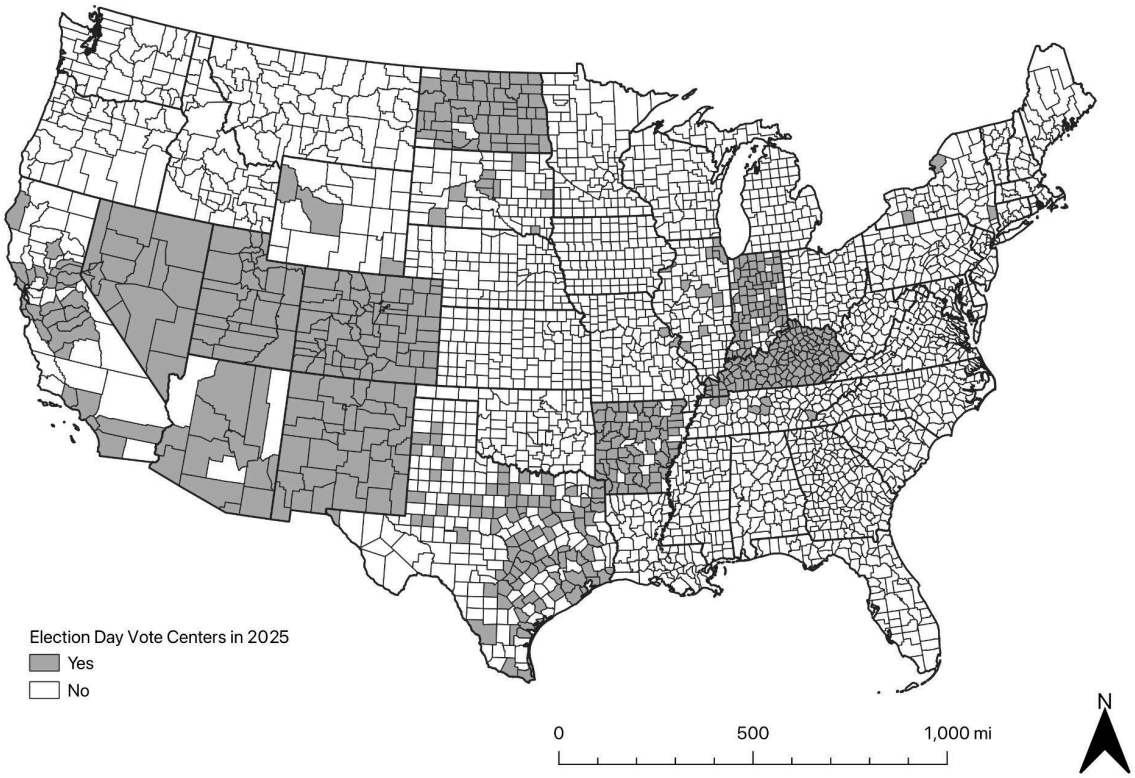


Figure 2 shows which local jurisdictions currently had Election Day vote centers as of 2025. In many states the map has a checkerboard quality: some local jurisdictions in the state have adopted vote centers while other jurisdictions have not. Election Day vote centers may not be appropriate for all localities. As noted above, at least 19 states have some local jurisdictions using Election Day vote centers. These states fall into two different regulatory regimes. About one-third of adopters are in vote-by-mail (VBM) states, primarily in the West, where most people vote by mail and relatively few people vote in person on Election Day. In VBM jurisdictions, vote centers are a relatively thin share of the election administration portfolio: just a few vote centers serve a relatively small number of Election Day voters. In the 2024 general election, the median vote

center jurisdiction in VBM states hosted three Election Day vote centers. On average, slightly less than 10 percent of ballots were cast at Election Day vote centers in these jurisdictions during the 2024 election (U.S. EAC 2025).

Figure 2

Jurisdictions with Election Day Vote Centers in 2025



The remaining adopters, roughly two-thirds of vote center jurisdictions, are located primarily in Midwest and Plains states where most people vote in person. In the in-person jurisdictions, vote centers are a more central part of the voting experience: a larger number of vote centers serve a bigger share of Election Day voters. In the 2024 general election, the median vote center jurisdiction in in-person states managed nine

Election Day vote centers. On average, roughly 43 percent of ballots were cast at Election Day vote centers in these jurisdictions during the 2024 general election (U.S. EAC 2025). Finally, Election Day vote centers are largely absent from the East coast of the United States.

Given the savings and administrative benefits associated with vote centers, as well as the resources needed for successful adoption, we expect that vote centers are most appealing to large jurisdictions. Large jurisdictions are most likely to have the financial resources and staff needed to purchase the technology and oversee the logistical and staffing changes required for successful implementation. Large jurisdictions also are most likely to value the reductions in polling places and poll workers generated by a shift to vote centers. We find evidence of this in the 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) data (U.S. EAC 2025). As Table 1 shows, Election Day vote centers are more common in large jurisdictions (those with at least 250,000 registered voters) and medium-sized jurisdictions than in small jurisdictions. Interestingly, the relationship between jurisdiction size and vote center adoption is stronger in vote-by-mail states than in in-person voting states.

Table 1. Vote Centers are more common in large jurisdictions

	Jurisdiction Size		
Percent using Election Day VC	**Small (< 25,000 registered voters)**	**Medium (25,000 to 250,000 registered)**	**Large (more than 250,000 registered)**
All states (N=6,447)	7.0%	19.6%	25.6%
VBM states (N=566)	18.7%	45.8%	63.8%
In-Person states (N=5,881)	6.0%	16.8%	13.5%

Administrative Data

To estimate the impact of Election Day vote centers on administrative outcomes, we merge our data on local jurisdictions using vote centers with administrative data from the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). The EAVS data provide comprehensive information about election administration in each local jurisdiction in the United States for each general election since 2004. We combine our vote center data with the EAVS time series data (U.S. EAC 2024) and the 2024 EAVS data (U.S. EAC 2025) to create a panel data set of roughly 64,500 observations (6,452 jurisdictions observed during 10 election cycles from 2004 to 2024). Because of missing data for many local jurisdictions, particularly in the early years of EAVS data collection, we have closer to 50,000 complete observations in the panel data. For example, in the 2006 election cycle EAVS reported county-level data for states that administer elections at the municipal level (Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin). In all other years EAVS reports municipal level data for these states. Since we want a panel data set with a consistent set of local jurisdictions in each state we drop the 2006 county observations for those six states. We also do our best to correct obvious typographical errors in the EAVS data.

We use the panel data to conduct a difference-in-differences (DID) analysis of election administration outcomes associated with vote centers. For each adopter, we know the general election when the jurisdiction first implemented Election Day vote centers. This allows us to compare the periods before and after adoption for each vote center jurisdiction. As Figure 1 shows, most jurisdictions adopted vote centers between

2020 and 2024. Non-adopting jurisdictions serve as a control group. In states with some vote center jurisdictions, we match non-adopting local jurisdictions to adopting jurisdictions within the same state. We match jurisdictions in states without any vote centers to adopting states with a similar mix of Election Day, early, and mail voting (Stewart 2025; U.S. EAC 2025), preferably from the same region of the country.

For each administrative outcome, we estimate a fixed effects regression equation to model the impact of vote centers. The DID design assesses the impact of vote centers by measuring how much the difference in administrative outcomes between the two groups of local jurisdictions changes after the adoption of vote centers. In ordinary least squares regression analysis, the treatment effect is estimated by an interaction between a treatment dummy variable (indicating whether a jurisdiction is a vote center adopter or not) and a binary time variable (indicating whether the time period is before or after adoption of vote centers).[1] A statistically significant coefficient for the interaction term indicates a vote center effect. Aside from missing data, we include all local jurisdictions as fixed effects in the analysis to take into account factors we cannot measure, such as local culture or administrative posture. For example, if a county has a particular approach to polling places or provisional ballots, for example, that should be captured by the fixed effect portion of the statistical model. We also include a control for the number of registered voters in each regression model, to account for possible changes in administrative outcomes as the local electorate increases or decreases. Finally, we estimate robust standard errors to correct for non-constant error variance.

[1] For a summary of the statistical treatment of DID methods, see Bailey (2021, chapter 8). In our application, the dummy variable for vote center adopters is absorbed into the jurisdiction fixed effects.

Our central goal is to examine whether vote centers are associated with a shift in administrative measures.

We first document a substantial reduction in the number of polling places and poll workers in jurisdictions that adopt Election Day vote centers. As Table 2 shows, the average number of polling places in vote center jurisdictions declines by 27 locations after adoption, slightly more than a 50 percent drop in the number of Election Day voting locations. The median vote center jurisdiction experiences a decline from 15 to 6 voting locations (a 60 percent drop) after adoption. Meanwhile, in non-adopting jurisdictions the number of Election Day polling places increased by 2.6 locations, on average, during the same time period.

Table 2. Vote Centers reduce the number of polling places and poll workers (Fixed effects regression: EAVS time series 2004-2024)

	Dependent Variable	
Explanatory Variable	**Election Day polling places**	**Number of poll workers**
After adoption	2.60* (0.73)	23.02* (5.86)
Vote center * After adoption	-27.24* (3.59)	-102.49* (17.77)
Control for # registered	✔	✔
Jurisdiction fixed effects	✔	✔
N	50,268	45,579
Local jurisdictions	6,452	6,446
R^2	0.83	0.79

The dependent variable is indicated at the top of each column. Cell entries are OLS coefficients (robust standard errors in parentheses).

*$p < .05$, two-tailed test

Table 2 also shows that the average number of poll workers in vote center jurisdictions declines by roughly 102 workers after adoption, almost a 30 percent drop in poll workers. The median vote center jurisdiction experiences a decline from 78 to 52 poll workers (a 33 percent drop) after adoption. Meanwhile, in non-adopting jurisdictions the average number of poll workers increased by 23 people during the same time period. We see a similar increase in the median number of poll workers in non-adopting jurisdictions. Finally, the control variable for the number of registered voters has a small but statistically significant negative coefficient in both regression models in Table 2. We observe a lot of local continuity in the number of polling places, even in many rural jurisdictions where the electorate has declined over the past 20 years.

The EAVS survey includes a question that asks local jurisdictions how easy or difficult it is to recruit a sufficient number of poll workers. There are five response options: very easy, somewhat easy, neither difficult nor easy, somewhat difficult, and very difficult.[2] Given the substantial reduction in poll workers in localities that adopt vote centers, we expect vote center jurisdictions will report an improvement in their ability to recruit poll workers. This is what we find in Table 3.

[2] We recoded jurisdictions who responded “not enough information to answer” (11,559 cases) to the middle category. Results in Table 3 are essentially the same without this coding change.

Table 3. Vote Centers reduce difficulties in recruiting poll workers

Comparison group	Before adoption	After adoption
	Very difficult or somewhat difficult recruiting poll workers	
Non-adopting jurisdictions	29.2%	46.7%
Vote center jurisdictions	59.1%	48.2%
	Very easy or somewhat easy recruiting poll workers	
Non-adopting jurisdictions	21.0%	17.9%
Vote center jurisdictions	15.3%	24.4%
	N = 29,133	N = 12,865

The EAVS time series data documents consistent difficulty in recruiting poll workers as the poll worker population has aged during the past 20 years, although there is some improvement since 2020 (Hostetter 2020; U.S. EAC 2025). Each year a plurality of local jurisdictions report some difficulty in recruiting poll workers. However, as Table 3 shows, vote center jurisdictions report a 9 percentage point decline in difficulty recruiting poll workers (and a similar increase in ease of recruiting poll workers) after adoption. In contrast, non-adopting jurisdictions report increased difficulty in recruiting poll workers during the same time period. The recent trend in easier poll worker recruitment seems to be driven by vote center jurisdictions.

Next we estimate the impact of vote centers on provisional ballots. Since vote centers provide flexibility by no longer requiring voters to appear at an assigned polling place, we expect a drop in provisional ballots after vote centers are adopted. The EAVS provisional ballot data is noisier than the polling place data. Consistent with prior case

studies, we observe a substantial reduction in the number of provisional ballots and rejected provisional ballots in jurisdictions that adopt Election Day vote centers. As Table 4 shows, the average number of provisional ballots cast in vote center jurisdictions declines by slightly more than 1000, a bit more than a 50 percent drop in the number of provisional ballots. In contrast, we observe no significant change in the number of provisional ballots cast in non-adopting jurisdictions during the same time period.

Table 4. Vote Centers reduce the number of provisional ballots (Fixed effects regression: EAVS time series 2004-2024)

	Dependent Variable	
Explanatory Variable	**Total provisional ballots**	**Rejected provisional ballots**
After adoption	87.62 (90.37)	0.17 (12.60)
Vote center * After adoption	-1009.19* (378.53)	-122.07* (45.47)
Control for # registered Jurisdiction fixed effects	✔ ✔	✔ ✔
N Local jurisdictions R^2	52,612 6,397 0.64	46,260 5,915 0.65

The dependent variable is indicated at the top of each column. Cell entries are OLS coefficients (robust standard errors in parentheses).

*$p < .05$, two-tailed test

We find a similar pattern with rejected provisional ballots. As Table 4 shows, the average number of rejected provisional ballots in vote center jurisdictions declines by slightly more than 122, almost a 40 percent drop in the number of rejected provisional

ballots. In contrast, we observe no significant change in the number of provisional ballots rejected in non-adopting jurisdictions during the same time period. To complete this point, we find a significant reduction, and near elimination, in the number of provisional ballots rejected for being in the wrong precinct in voter center jurisdictions, but not in non-adopting jurisdictions. Finally, we find no relationship between jurisdiction size (the number of registered voters) and provisional ballots (total or rejected). Thus, the EAVS data confirm a broad reduction in provisional ballots in jurisdictions that adopt Election Day vote centers.

Vote Centers and the Voting Experience

In addition to developing a database on the implementation and performance of vote centers across the country, we examine the relationship between Election Day vote centers and reports of the voting experience. We use data from the 2024 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE). The 2024 survey includes 10,200 registered voters, with 200 responses gathered from each state and the District of Columbia. The survey was administered by YouGov immediately after the 2024 election, from November 6 to November 27. The survey includes several questions about how respondents experienced the voting process, so it is a good resource for comparing people who voted at an Election Day vote center to other voters in the same election.

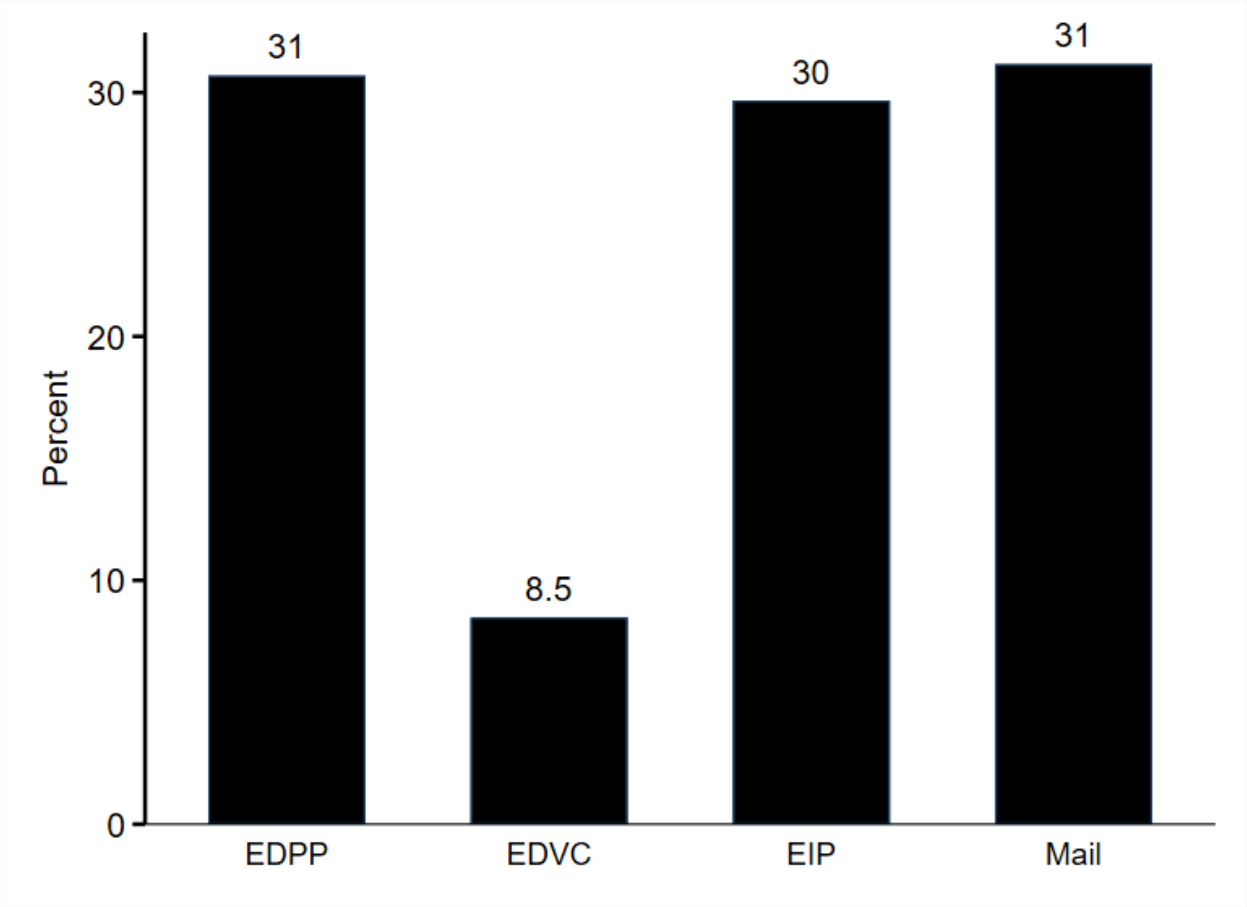
We matched our data on Election Day vote center jurisdictions to the 2024 SPAE data via the zip code variable. Roughly 28 percent of the SPAE respondents lived in a jurisdiction that offered Election Day vote centers in the 2024 election, which is similar

to our estimate of the nationwide availability of vote centers above. However, not everyone in a vote center jurisdiction cast their ballot at an Election Day vote center.

Election Day vote center voters made up a small but substantial portion of the electorate in 2024. In the SPAE sample, 9,520 respondents said they voted or tried to vote in the 2024 election. When asked about their voting mode, 39 percent reported voting on Election Day, 30 percent voted early in-person (EIP), and 31 percent voted by mail, figures similar to estimates from the Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey (Stewart 2025).[3] When we further break down the 2024 Election Day voters, 31 percent of voters in the SPAE sample voted at an assigned polling place (EDPP) while 8.5 percent voted at a vote center (EDVC in Figure 3). We estimate that roughly one-third of respondents living in a vote center jurisdiction voted at an Election Day vote center. Furthermore, approximately one-in-five Election Day voters cast their ballots at a vote center in 2024.

[3] In the SPAE sample, 24 potential voters reported “I don’t know” to the voting mode question. Those respondents are excluded from the analyses that follow.

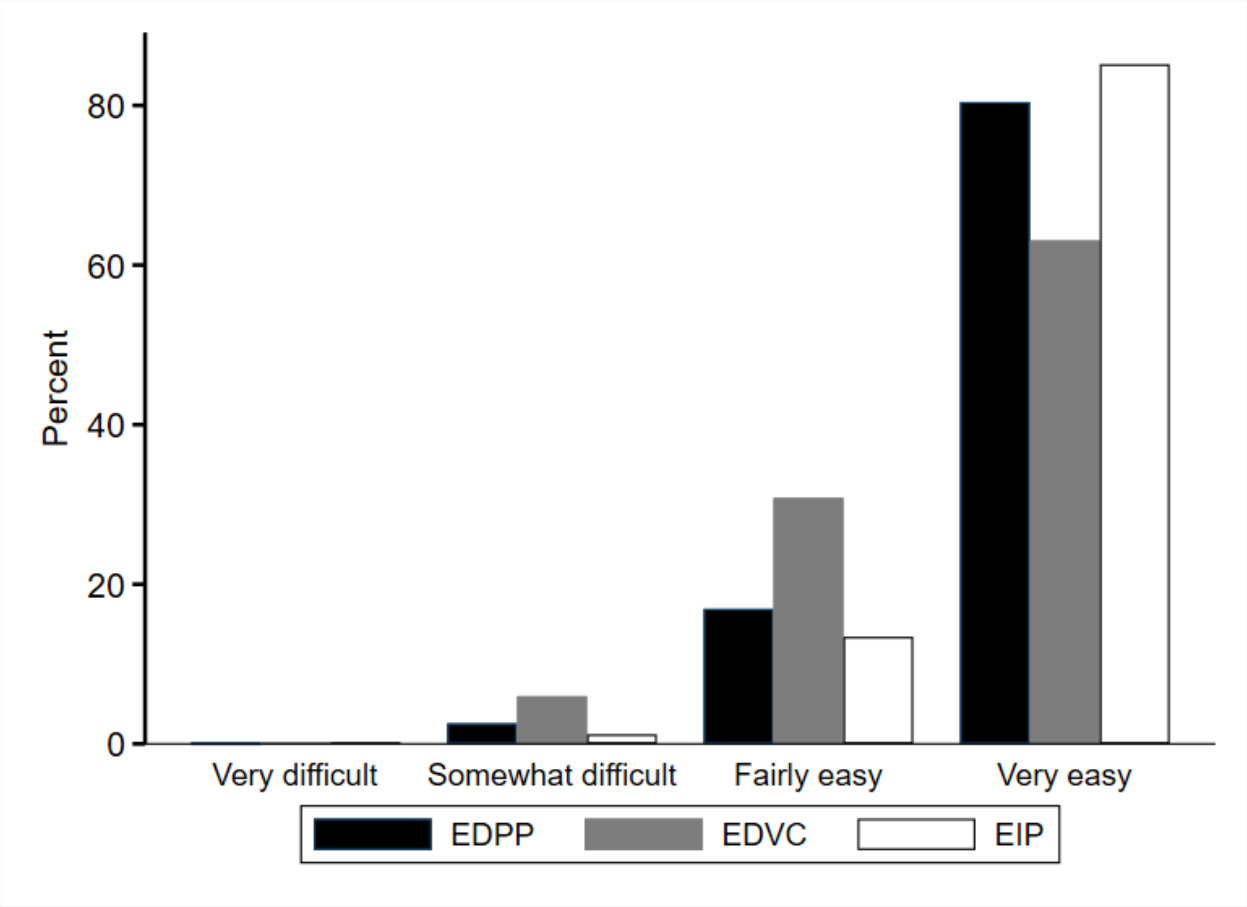
Figure 3. Voting Mode in the 2024 General Election, SPAE Survey



Examining measures of the voting experience from the 2024 SPAE survey, we see that vote center voters report a somewhat less positive experience than other voters. Since implementing vote centers means a substantial reduction in voting locations, many vote center voters will cast their ballots at a new location and may face some difficulty in finding their voting location. As Figure 4 shows, 85 percent of early in-person voters and 80 percent of Election Day polling place voters indicated that it was “very easy” to find their polling place, compared to 63 percent of Election Day vote center voters. Vote center participants were more likely than other voters to report that it was “somewhat difficult” or “fairly easy” to find their polling place in 2024. These

differences by voting mode are statistically significant (p<.01). Stewart (2025) notes a ten percentage point decline from 2020 to 2024 in the share of voters who reported that it was very easy to find their polling place on Election Day. Perhaps some of the decline in ease of finding polling places is due to the significant expansion of vote centers during that period.

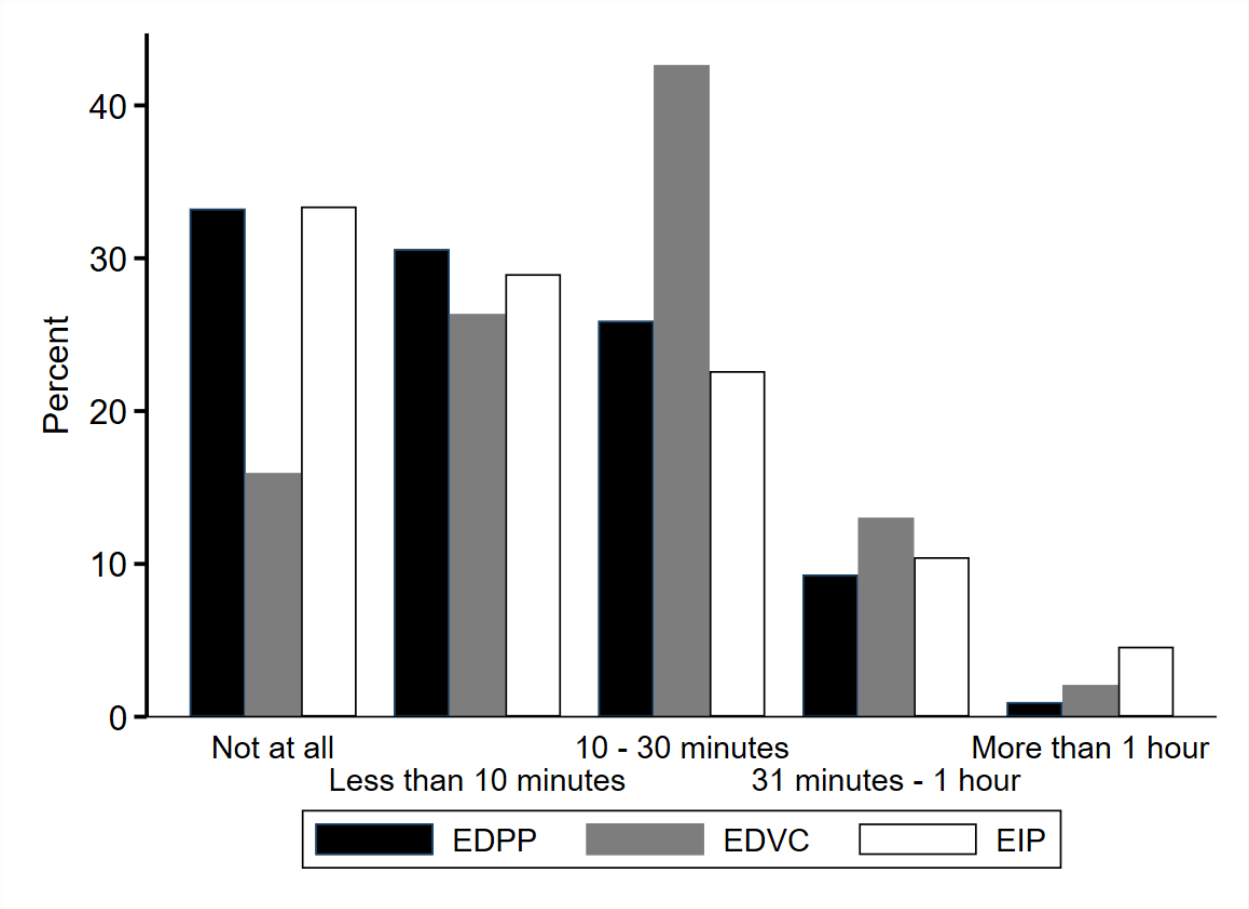
Figure 4. Difficulty Finding Polling Place by Voting Mode, 2024 SPAE Survey



We see a similar pattern with voting wait times. With fewer voting locations, vote centers must serve a larger number of voters than traditional polling places. Thus, we expect that voting lines tend to be longer at vote centers. As Figure 5 shows, fewer voters experience short wait times (10 minutes or less) at Election Day vote centers (42

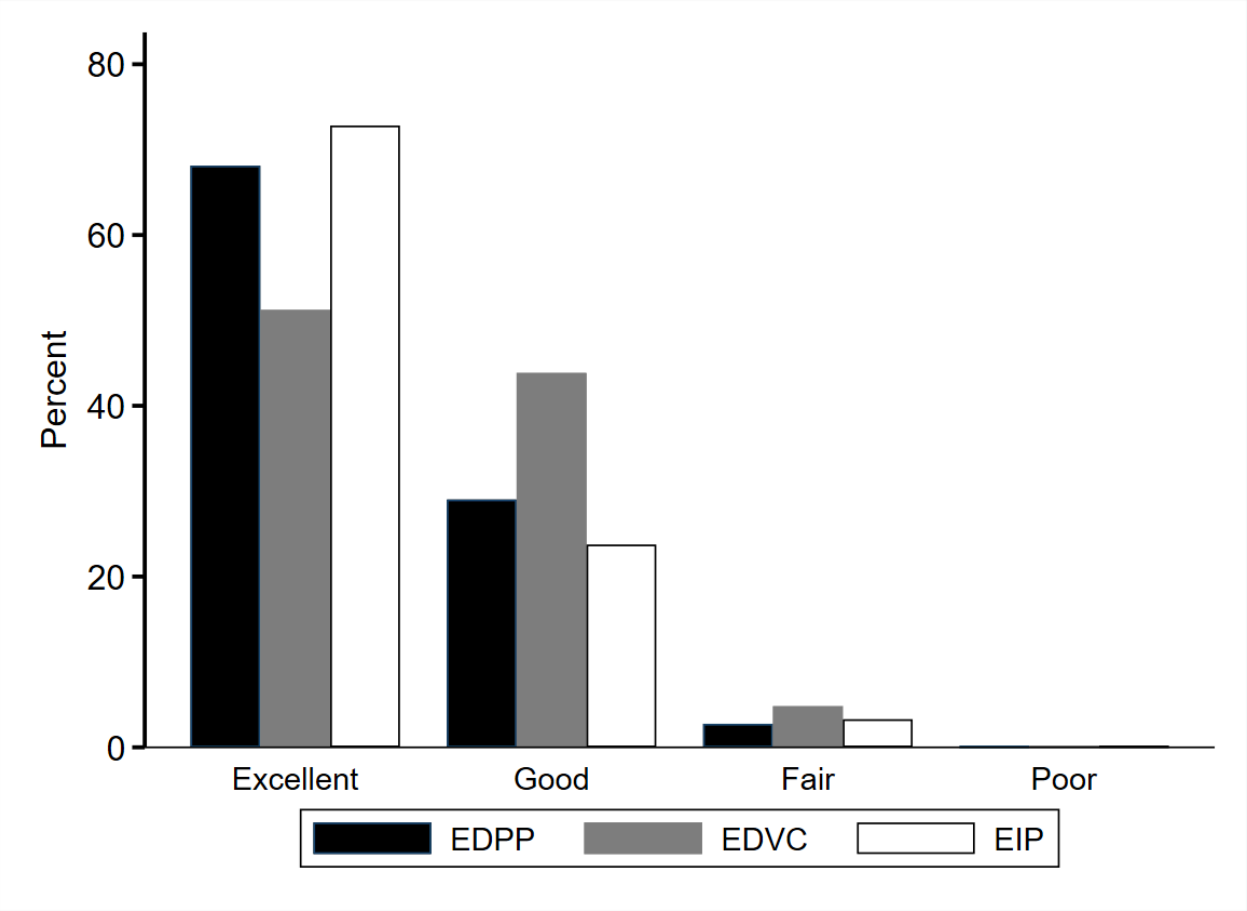
percent) than at Election Day polling places (64 percent) or early in-person locations (62 percent). Similarly, vote center participants were more likely than other voters to report waiting between ten minutes and one hour to vote, but vote center voters were not more likely than others to wait more than one hour. These differences by voting mode are statistically significant ($p<.01$). The Presidential Commission on Election Administration (2014) created a goal that people should not have to wait more than 30 minutes to vote. When we focus on that benchmark, 15 percent of EDVC and early voters and 10 percent of Election Day polling place voters waited at least 30 minutes in the 2024 election.

Figure 5. Waiting Times by Voting Mode, 2024 SPAE Survey



We see a familiar pattern when we examine measures of poll worker and polling place performance. As Figure 6 shows, 73 percent of early in-person voters and 68 percent of Election Day polling place voters rate their poll worker performance as "excellent," compared to 51 percent of Election Day vote center voters. Vote center participants were more likely than other in-person voters to evaluate poll worker performance as "good" in the 2024 election ($p < .01$). There were no significant differences by voting mode in ratings of poll worker performance as "fair" or "poor." Similarly, 87 percent of early in-person voters and 84 percent of Election Day polling place voters indicate that their polling place was run "very well," compared to 79 percent of Election Day vote center voters. Vote center voters were more likely than other in-person voters to evaluate their polling place as "okay." Polling place ratings of "not well" or "terrible" were extremely rare and did not vary significantly by voting mode. We also found no significant differences by voting mode when we examined reported problems with voter registration or voting equipment.

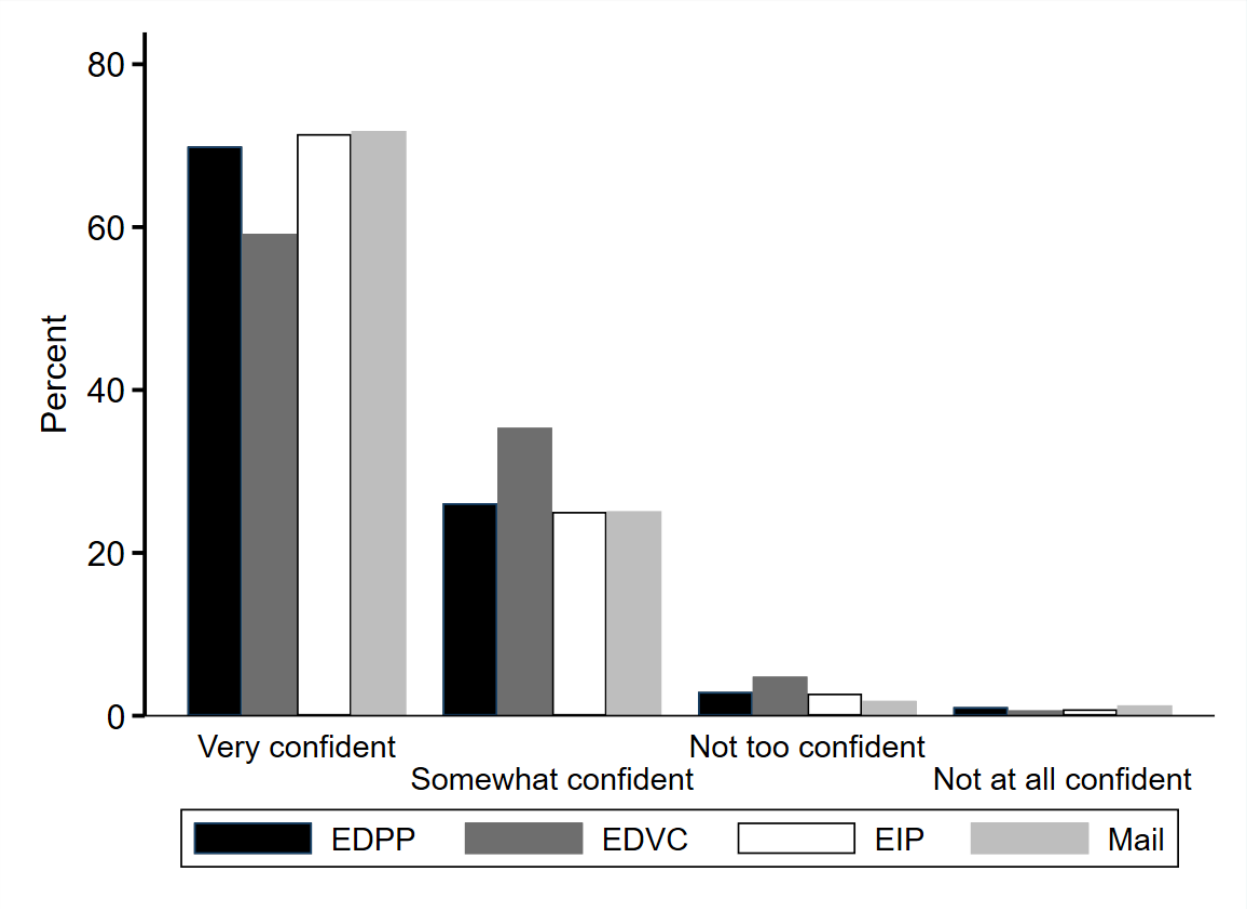
Figure 6. Poll Worker Performance by Voting Mode, 2024 SPAE Survey



Finally, we see much the same pattern when we examine measures of the overall voting experience. As Figure 7 shows, 72 percent of mail voters, 71 percent of early in-person voters and 70 percent of Election Day polling place voters are “very confident” that their vote was counted as they intended, compared to 59 percent of Election Day vote center voters. Vote center participants were more likely than other voters to be “somewhat confident” in their own vote in the 2024 election ($p < .01$). There were no significant differences by voting mode in “not too confident” and “not at all confident” responses. Similarly, Election Day vote center participants were less likely than other voters to strongly agree that their voting experience was mostly positive, but EDVC voters were no more likely than other voters to disagree that the voting experience was

mostly positive. In almost all of these polling place and voting experience comparisons, Election Day vote center voters were less likely than other voters to give the most positive response and more likely to give the next most positive response. SPAE respondents who cast their ballots at an Election Day vote center still report a largely positive voting experience, but a somewhat less positive experience than other voters.

Figure 7. Confidence in Own Vote by Voting Mode, 2024 SPAE Survey



Opinion on Vote Centers

We also narrowed our focus to St. Louis County, Missouri and Fresno County, California to gain a deeper understanding of poll workers' and voters' experiences with vote centers. St. Louis County is a suburban jurisdiction in Missouri spanning just over 500 square miles immediately west of St. Louis City (which is a separate county). Approximately one million people live in St. Louis County, making it the largest county by population in Missouri (U.S. Census Bureau 2024a). With about 724,000 registered voters living in 968 precincts, St. Louis County is among the 50 largest local election jurisdictions in the nation (St. Louis County Board of Elections 2025). White residents comprise two-thirds of the population. A quarter of the population are Black or African American, 5.4 percent are Asian or Asian American, and four percent are Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2024a). St. Louis County leans Democratic with 60.79% of voters casting a ballot for Kamala Harris in 2024 and 37.39% supporting Donald Trump. As a large county serving a diverse and mobile electorate, St. Louis County election officials face a number of challenges (St. Louis County 2024). Missouri law says nothing about vote centers, but does not prohibit them. In 2020, St. Louis County was the first jurisdiction in Missouri to implement vote centers, and the county did so largely on its own, without guidance from the state, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Manion et al. 2023).

Fresno County, California has a large geographic footprint, spanning nearly 6,000 square miles, and has just over one million residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2024b). With a population that is just slightly higher than St. Louis County, it is much less densely populated, and it has about 525,000 registered voters (California State

Portal 2025). The majority of the residents are Hispanic or Latino (55.3%). Non-hispanic white residents comprise about a quarter of the population, 12.4 percent of the population is Asian, about six percent is Black, and about three percent is Native American (U.S. Census Bureau 2024b). Over the past three decades, Fresno County voters have gone back and forth in their preference between Democratic and Republican presidential candidates; however, Democrats had won the presidential vote since 2004 (Sheehan 2020). That streak ended in 2024 when a small majority (50.89%) of Fresno County voters cast a ballot for Donald Trump and 46.5% supported Kamala Harris (Fresno County 2024). Fresno County began planning in 2019 and first implemented vote centers in March 2020, two weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic put the state into its first lockdown (Bryant et al. 2024).

As part of a previous research project, Lisa Bryant, Anita Manion, and David Kimball (2024) conducted online surveys of registered voters in both Fresno and St. Louis counties following the 2022 general election. To assess voter awareness of the implementation of vote centers, respondents were asked, “Where are you allowed to vote in (county name)?” Nearly 62% of voters in St. Louis County reported that they could vote at any location compared to only 42% of voters in Fresno County. When excluding those who said, “don’t know” and keeping only those who chose an assigned precinct or any location, the difference is smaller, but still statistically significant with a 13 percentage point gap (58% in Fresno County compared to 71% in St. Louis County who knew they could vote at any location). Respondents were also asked whether they preferred letting voters go to any polling location or whether they preferred an assigned location. Nearly three-fourths (72%) preferred the vote center model to assigned

locations. Preference for vote centers was high in both locations, but more pronounced in St. Louis (80%) than in Fresno (71%) ($t=4.13$, $p<.001$), excluding don't know responses.

We also surveyed poll workers in St. Louis and Fresno Counties in 2022 and 2024 to determine their perceptions of vote centers. In the 2022 post-election survey, administered by Barry Burden and Bob Stein, we found that 89 percent of Fresno County and 93 percent of St. Louis County poll workers preferred vote centers to assigned precinct voting. In 2024, the poll worker survey was administered by David Kimball and Anita Manion. The online survey was in the field from December 14, 2024 through March 4, 2025. In Fresno County there were 195 respondents and in St. Louis County there were 1,280 respondents. Consistent with the 2022 survey, we found that an overwhelming 97 percent of St. Louis County poll workers and 82 percent of Fresno County poll workers preferred vote centers to assigned precinct voting, excluding don't know responses. Overall, both voters and poll workers express a strong preference for vote centers over assigned precinct locations.

Conclusion/Discussion

The adoption of vote centers has grown quickly over the past few years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many states now allow vote centers, and approximately 30 percent of registered voters in the United States live in jurisdictions that provide Election Day vote centers. Our research helps document the national reach of this election reform. The flexibility and resilience offered by vote centers, as well as the technology and staff required for implementation, make them

more attractive to large, densely populated jurisdictions. Adopting vote centers typically means a substantial reduction in the number of polling places and poll workers. Thus, it is no surprise that vote center jurisdictions report greater ease in recruiting poll workers after adoption. Furthermore, we find nationwide evidence that shifting to vote centers is associated with significant declines in the number of provisional ballots and rejected provisional ballots cast in vote center jurisdictions. In the 2024 election, Election day vote center voters report a fairly positive voting experience, but somewhat less positive than those who cast their ballot by a different voting mode. Finally, in surveys of voters and poll workers in two adopting jurisdictions we find widespread support for vote centers. We hope this is the first of several reports on the implementation and performance of vote centers. While we do not examine early voting in this study, we note that many local jurisdictions now provide a small number of vote centers for early voting. This may lead voters to expect to be able to vote at any location on Election Day too.

Nevertheless, vote centers may not be for everyone. Local election officials are in a good position to determine how and whether vote centers will serve their constituents and local conditions. We have noticed some variation in basic features of vote center implementation. For example, a few jurisdictions offer a hybrid model with some vote centers and assigned polling places. We found another county that provides vote centers within each town but does not allow people to vote outside their home town. We will see how far the vote center movement goes.

References

Alvarez, R. Michael, Jian Cao, and Yimeng Li. 2021. “Voting Experiences, Perceptions of Fraud, and Voter Confidence.” *Social Science Quarterly* 102(4):1225–1238.

Atkeson, Lonna Rae and Kyle Saunders. 2007. “The Effect of Election Administration on Voter Confidence: A Local Matter?” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40(4):655-660.

Bailey, Michael A. 2021. *Real Stats: Using Econometrics for Political Science and Public Policy*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bitzer, Michael, Tyler Dukes, and Chris Cooper. 2023. “Substitution Effect, Turnout Effect, or Both? Changes in Distance to the Early Voting Site and Voter Turnout.” *Election Law Journa*l 22:278-285.

Bryant, Lisa A. 2020. “Seeing Is Believing: An Experiment on Absentee Ballots and Voter Confidence.” *American Politics Research* 48(6):700–704.

Bryant, Lisa A. 2019. “Does Changing Rules Change Voting? An Examination of the Voter Choice Act and Vote Center Implementation in California.” Presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C.

Bryant, Lisa A., Anita Manion, and David C. Kimball. 2024. “A Tale of Two Counties: A Study of Vote Centers in Fresno County and St. Louis County.” *Election Law Journal* 23(3):277-291.

Bryant, Lisa A., David Kimball, Gretchen Macht, Anita Manion, Mindy Romero, and Robert M. Stein. 2023. *In-person Voting: Best Practices and New Areas for Research*. MIT Election Data + Science Lab, September. https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/mapping-election-science/white-papers/voting-in-person

California State Portal. 2025. Registration by County. https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/ror-odd-year-2025/county.pdf

Chen, Cynthia, Arisa Sadeghpour, and Matt Lamb. 2021. “Vote Centers and the Voter Experience.” *American Politics Research* 49:591-603.

Claassen, Ryan L., David B. Magleby, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2013. “Voter Confidence and the Election-Day Voting Experience.” *Political Behavior* 35(2):215–35.

Cortina, Jeronimo and Brandon Rottinghaus. 2023. “‘The Quiet Revolution: Convenience Voting, Vote Centers, and Turnout in Texas Elections.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 11:246-266.

Doyle, Scott. 2008. “Practitioner Commentary: Vote Centers, Voting Equipment, and Uncertainty in Election Administration.” *Public Administration Review* 68:800-801.

Folz, David H. 2014. “Vote Centers as a Strategy to Control Election Administration Costs: Findings from a Pilot Project.” *SAGE Open* 4(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014525414

Fresno County. 2024. Results for November 5, 2024 Presidential General Election. https://www.fresnocountyca.gov/Departments/County-ClerkRegistrar-of-Voters/Elections/Election-Results/2024/RESULTS-FOR-NOVEMBER-5-2024-PRESIDENTIAL-GENERAL-ELECTION

Hale, Kathleen, Robert Montjoy and Mitchell Brown 2015. *Administering Elections: How American Elections Work.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Hall, Steven R., Joseph Losco, and Raymond Scheele. 2012. “Convenient Turnout: A Case Study of the Indiana Vote Center Pilot Program.” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 3(8):1-9.

Haspel, Moshe, and H. Gibbs Knotts. 2005. “Location, Location, Location: Precinct Placement and the Costs of Voting.” *Journal of Politics* 67:560-573.

Huefner, Steven F., Daniel P. Tokaji, and Edward B. Foley, with Nathan A. Cemenska. 2007. *From Registration to Recounts: the Election Ecosystems of Five Midwestern States*. Columbus: Ohio State University Moritz College of Law.

Jones, Colin J., and Robert M. Stein. 2021. “Recruiting Persons to Work the Polls.” *Election Law Journal* 20(3):315-326.

King, Bridgett A. 2020. “Waiting to vote: the effect of administrative irregularities at polling locations and voter confidence.” *Policy Studies* 41(2-3):230-248.

Manion, Anita, David Kimball, Joseph Anthony, Adriano Udani, and Ryan Pritchard. 2023. “Vote at any Polling Place: A Case Study of St. Louis County, Missouri.” *Election Law Journal* 22(4):287–305.

McGhee, Eric. 2025. How the Voter’s Choice Act Changed Turnout in California. Public Policy Institute of California.

Montjoy, Robert S. 2008. “The Public Administration of Elections.” *Public Administration Review* 68:788-799.

Persily, Nathaniel, and Charles Stewart III. 2021. “The Miracle and Tragedy of the 2020 U.S. Election.” *Journal of Democracy* 32:159-178.

Romero, Mindy, Eric McGhee, and Thad Kousser. 2019. Voters Choice Act: How Did Voters Experience the New Reform in 2018? Future of California Elections Brief.

Romero, Mindy, and Barbara Chami. 2022. “California’s Voter Choice Act: 2020 General Election Voter Outreach and Education.” California SOS, May 13.

Romero, Mindy, Anna Meier, and Emil Pavia. 2022. “California’s Voter Choice Act: 2020 General Election Voter Registration and Turnout.” California SOS, May 13.

Scheele, Raymond H., Joseph Losco, and Sally Jo Vasicko. 2009. Assessing and Evaluating Indiana Vote Centers: The Development of a National Model. Final Report to the Pew Center on the States.

Sheehan, T. 2020, November 12. “Is Fresno County Republican or Democrat? Here’s Our 30-year Voting Record in Big Races.” *The Fresno Bee*. https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article247080152.html

St. Louis County. 2024. November 5, 2024 General Election. https://stlouiscountymo.gov/st-louis-county-government/board-of-elections/election-results-archive/2024-election-results/november-5-2024-general-election/

St. Louis County Board of Elections. 2025. Board of Elections. https://stlouiscountymo.gov/st-louis-county-government/board-of-elections/

Stein, Robert. 2016. Colorado Voting Reforms: Early Results. Washington, D.C.: Pew Charitable Trusts.

Stein, Robert M., and Greg Vonnahme. 2008. “Engaging the Unengaged Voter: Vote Centers and Voter Turnout”. *Journal of Politics* 70(2):487–497.

Stein, Robert M. and Greg Vonnahme. 2012a. ‘‘Effect of Election Day Vote Centers on Voter Participation.’’ *Election Law Journal* 11:291-301.

Stein, Robert M. and Greg Vonnahme. 2012b. ‘‘When, Where, and How we Vote: Does it Matter?’’ *Social Science Quarterly* 93:692-712.

Stein, Robert M., and Greg Vonnahme. 2014. “Polling Place Practices and the Voting Experience.” In *The Measure of American Elections*, eds. Barry C. Burden and Charles Stewart III, 166-187. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stewart, Charles III. 2025. “How we Voted in 2024: A Topical Look at the Survey of the Performance of American Elections.” Cambridge, MA: MIT Election Data + Science Lab.

Tomkins, Sabina, Keniel Yao, Johann Gaebler, Tobias Konitzer, David Rothschild, Marc Meredith, and Sharad Goel. 2022. “Blocks as Geographic Continuities: The Effect of Polling-Place Assignment on Voting.” *Political Analysis* 31:165-180.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2024a. Quick Facts St. Louis County, Missouri. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/stlouiscountymissouri/PST045224

U.S. Census Bureau. 2024b. Quick Facts Fresno County, California. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fresnocountycalifornia/EDU635223

U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2025. 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey. U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Release 1.0.

U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2024. EAVS Time Series Data File. U.S. Election Assistance Commission, V1.

U.S. President's Commission on Election Administration. 2014. The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the President's Commission on Election Administration, https://web.mit.edu/supportthevoter/www/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf.