

Voter's Choice Act Research Brief Series

Best Practices: Siting Vote Centers and Drop Boxes

This best practices summary is a companion to the research brief California Voter's Choice Act Implementation Process: Election Administration Plan and Vote Center Siting, based on an extensive study of the five counties that adopted the Voter's Choice Act in 2018.



Identifying Vote Center and Drop Box Locations

A major component of county implementation of the California Voter's Choice Act (VCA) is the establishment of vote centers and drop boxes. Instead of voting occurring primarily in person at traditional neighborhood polling places, VCA counties give voters the choice of mailing in their ballots, returning them at a ballot drop box, or dropping off or casting ballots in person at a vote center. Vote centers offering accessible voting options, language assistance, and conditional voter registration will be available to voters up to ten days before Election Day. Because access to voter services is essential to the success of public elections, determining the locations of vote centers and drop boxes is a critical part of a county's VCA planning process.

Best Practices for Determining Sites for Vote Centers and Drop Boxes

Election officials in existing VCA counties underscore the complexity of the vote center and drop box siting process. Counties must invest time and resources into gathering community input on voter needs and balancing those needs with legal requirements around accessibility, facility size, and network connectivity, among other considerations. The following recommendations for county election offices are based on the experiences of county VCA elections officials and community advocates interviewed as part of the study.

- **Start early in the siting process.** Siting vote centers and drop boxes is a time-intensive process. County election offices must set aside extensive staff time to engage with community groups to learn about voter needs, and then identify and recruit locations that meet a lengthy set of criteria. Officials in existing VCA counties report that particularly because voting centers need to be reserved for up to eleven days of use instead of only on Election Day, many existing polling places are not available. Identifying suitable sites requires outreach, persistence, and partnership.

About the Voter's Choice Act

The Voter's Choice Act (VCA) provides California counties the choice of adopting a new voting model that includes replacing neighborhood polling places with vote centers and mailing Vote-By-Mail ballots to all registered voters. New vote centers will offer a variety of services including in-person voting, accessible voting options, language assistance, mail ballot drop-off and conditional voter registration. They will be distributed throughout the county and available to all voters up to ten days before Election Day. Five counties adopted the VCA model for the 2018 election cycle, and an additional nine counties will adopt it for the 2020 election cycle, in total comprising approximately half of the state's current registered voter population.

Criteria for Vote Center and Drop Box Locations

When selecting locations of vote centers and drop boxes, the Voter's Choice Act specifies that county election officials consider, at a minimum, these 14 criteria.

Transportation

- Proximity to public transit
- Access to free parking
- Traffic patterns
- Proximity to communities with low rates of vehicle ownership
- Time and distance a voter must travel to reach a location

Geography

- Proximity to population centers
- Proximity to geographically isolated populations
- The need for mobile vote centers in addition to those established by the VCA

Underrepresented Voters

- Proximity to language minority communities
- Proximity to low-income communities
- Proximity to voters with disabilities
- The need for alternate voting methods for voters with disabilities
- Proximity to communities with historically low vote by mail usage
- Proximity to communities of eligible voters that are not registered

"It was definitely more challenging securing ... vote centers than it was ... polling places."

- VCA county election official

Vote Centers versus Polling Places

Like traditional polling places, vote centers under the Voter's Choice Act are locations where voters can cast ballots, but they differ in important ways.

Polling Places	Vote Centers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open on Election Day only	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open on Election Day and up to 10 days prior
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Serve neighborhood voters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Serve any voter countywide, requiring more facility space, parking space, and equipment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide limited voter services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a variety of services to assist with voter access, language assistance, and conditional voter registration

- **Acknowledge the need to balance competing priorities.**

County election officials must weigh many considerations when siting vote centers and drop boxes. Security, for instance, is made easier when a drop box is located inside a building, but a drop box is accessible at any hour if located outside. Likewise, meeting minimum space requirements for vote center sites is critical, but can limit the establishment of vote centers in some communities. Transparency about competing priorities as well as genuine collaboration with community groups and coalitions can help make difficult decisions more successful.

- **Work closely with community groups to recruit vote center and drop box locations that meet community needs.**

Community groups contribute valuable understanding of their constituents' needs as well as knowledge of and connections to community gathering places that may serve as effective vote centers or drop box sites. For example, in existing VCA counties, community coalitions have helped identify locations that voters could easily access during extended day and evening hours, such as drop boxes in grocery stores. Some have also brought attention to the possibility that some community members could feel uncomfortable voting at a government building such as a city hall.

- **Collaborate with community groups on broad outreach to inform voters of vote center and drop box locations.**

Community advocates point out that public education about where to vote or find voter services is critical to achieving the goal of making voting accessible. Voters need to know not only how the VCA affects the process and timing of voting, but the detailed locations of vote centers and drop boxes, including where inside a building to find a drop box. Community-based organizations' direct and trusted connections to voters make them indispensable partners in this outreach.

“Not every community that wanted a vote center for the period of time that they wanted it could get it.”

- VCA county election official

“We had started looking at internal locations [of drop boxes], mostly at city clerks offices ... but the community partners were very, very helpful and we decided to pick exterior locations which were 24 hours, 7 days a week, which was very successful.”

- VCA county election official