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REMOVING THE “US” AND “THEM” FACTOR: MAKING ELECTION MONITORS WORK WITH YOU

Background

Independent citizen oversight of elections is an integral part of the American political process. Over the past decade, election monitoring activities in major elections have increased significantly. While these activities promote greater accountability and transparency in the elections process, they often overwhelm elections offices with complaints, media inquiries, and voter confusion. In 2008, Los Angeles County created its Election Monitor Program. The program seeks to work collaboratively with election monitoring efforts in order to better: manage the increased activity; ensure informed monitors; react to Election Day problems in real time and with better information.

The Problem

Since the 2000 and 2004 Presidential Elections the monitoring of polling places on Election Day, by political parties, community organizations, and advocacy organizations has increased significantly in scale, sophistication, and politicization. To some extent, monitoring activities in major elections have become an operation that nearly parallels the actual election. While these activities promote greater accountability and transparency in the elections process, the lack of a coordinated approach which seeks to channel and measure these activities on the part of election officials often results in elections offices being overwhelmed by ill informed complaints, negative media inquiries, and voter confusion. The “Election Monitor Program” addresses three major needs.

- 1) Election monitoring activities have become a core civic participation function for many state and national civic organizations. The activities have increased the sophistication of election monitoring to serve as a data and observation generator for advocacy activities. As a result, many of the data and observations collected on Election Day are not provided to Election Officials until several weeks or months after the election. The post-election release of this information eliminates the ability of election officials to respond to potential problems on Election Day, when swift action can make a difference.

- 2) Greater election monitoring also means a larger number of people who must have a local and detailed understanding of polling place procedures. Poorly trained election monitors can result in misinformed complaints that often create voter and poll worker confusion at the polls.

3) The dwindling resources available to local election officials make it increasingly difficult to recruit, retain, and/or increase the number of bodies that can be deployed to support poll workers and help troubleshoot problems at the polls. Election officials must leverage available resources to increase their capacity track polling place operations on Election Day.

Program Description and Objectives

In 2008, with the anticipated high interest in the election and the large scale voter registration and mobilization efforts taking place, the Department expanded its election observation activities to include a new “Election Monitor Program.” Interest in the election was sure to generate unprecedented turnout and, more importantly, scores of first time voters less familiar with the process. The “Election Monitor Program” sought to increase the level of coordination and communication with campaigns, community organizations, and advocacy organizations conducting Election Day monitoring activities at the polls. The programs objectives were:

1. Adopt a partnership model with election observers to ensure that problems and/or snags observed are resolved on Election Day and do not prevent a voter from casting their ballot.
2. Provide a basic level of training on RR/CC training topics and methodology in order to alleviate alleged complaints due to a lack of knowledge regarding Los Angeles voting system procedures or training protocols.
3. Establish a clear line of communication between election monitors and the department on Election Day.

The program utilized existing departmental staff and resources to develop a customized training for election monitors, set up an internal phone bank and email account for monitors to communicate directly with our elections staff, and provide a series of materials and forms to standardize the collection of data and documentation of complaints by Election Monitors.

Project Implementation

Once conceptualized, the implementation of the project was relatively fast. From the drafting of our initial concept paper in January, 2008 the program was fully operational in time for the February 5, 2008 California Presidential Primary Election. The following is an outline of the program implementation plan.

- Create a phone hunt with six phone lines to receive calls;
- Create email account e-troubleshooter@rrcc.lacounty.gov;
- Schedule and provide notice of training and orientation for Election Monitors;
- Prepare election monitor materials (certificates, report logs, and FAQs);
- Identify and train internal staff;
- Issue post election report.

Technology Required

The program required a minimum investment of technology. More importantly, implementation utilized existing technologies.

- Six standard telephone lines grouped in a hunt to ring as a hotline;
- Email access

Program Costs

No additional costs.

Program Success and Best Practice

The “Election Monitor Program” was launched during the February 5, 2008 Presidential Primary in California; an election that saw the highest turnout for a primary election in decades. The program was a great success. More than 20 lead representatives from campaigns, political parties, community organizations, and advocacy organizations attended the Election Monitor training. On Election Day, more than 200 complaints from Election Monitors were logged and resolved. This means that in many cases voter issues or problems at the polls were resolved during voting hours and did not further impede other voters.

The program also helped to identify lead staff from the various entities conducting election monitoring, thereby establishing a direct line of communication with organizational leadership to better resolve issues that might arise at the polling place. More importantly, the program helped to position the department as a resource and committed to enfranchisement, and the smooth and fair conduct of the election. The enhanced rapport and communication with organizations eliminated the often adversarial or “us” and “them” dichotomy that often develops between advocates and election officials. The Election Monitor Program is now a permanent operation during major elections in Los Angeles County and serves as a model of the department philosophy that “elections are a collaborative process between the election official and the community.”

APPENDIX A

ELECTION OBSERVER LETTER**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
REGISTRAR-RECORDER/COUNTY CLERK**
12400 IMPERIAL HWY. – P.O. BOX 1024, NORWALK, CALIFORNIA 90651-1024 www.lavote.net

DEAN C. LOGAN
Acting Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

Dear Election Observer:

On behalf of the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk I want to thank you for your interest in participating in our department's Election Observer Program. Our office is glad to partner with your organization in helping ensure that the February 5th Presidential Primary Election is accessible to all qualified voters. Our department applauds your commitment to protecting democracy and looks forward to working with you on Election Day. The Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk's primary goal in partnering with Election Observers is to ensure that problems you observe on Election Day are adequately and appropriately resolved and do not prevent voters from casting their ballot on Election Day.

As part of our Election Observer program we have prepared several important documents to help facilitate communication between your observation activities and our department. Enclosed with this communication you will find the following items:

- A. **ELECTION OBSERVER CERTIFICATES:** These certificates are intended to facilitate your election monitoring activities out in the field. They in no way establish the bearer of the certificate as an official representative of the department. Additionally please note that under California Election Law it is not required to obtain a certificate in order to observe polling places on Election Day.
- B. **OBSEVATION LOG:** This forms are intended to help you document and report observations to the department during and after the election. The bottom portion of the logs list a phone number and email address for observers to communicate with our department on Election Day.
- C. **POLLING PLACE LIST:** List of polling places for the February 5th Presidential Primary.
- D. **ELECTION DAY CONTACTS:** Observation Logs contain direct line and an email address for Election Day reports/communications.
- E. **ELECTION OBSERVER GUIDELINES:** Set forth in Los Angeles County's Election Observer Plan.

We ask that you remind all monitors of the following:

1. POLL WORKERS ARE VOLUNTEERS JUST LIKE YOU
2. POLL WORKERS' PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVE IS TO PROCESS VOTERS
3. INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO THE INSPECTOR AT EVERY POLLING PLACE
4. RESPECT, PROFESSIONALISM, AND A SMILE GO A LONG WAY
5. NO DISRUPTION OF THE VOTING PROCESS WILL BE TOLERATED

Thank you for your participation in the program.

Sincerely,

Efrain Escobedo
Executive Liaison
Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

APPENDIX B

ELECTION OBSERVER CERTIFICATES/TRAINING HAND-OUT**ELECTION OBSERVER PROGRAM****FEBRUARY 5TH 2008 PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY ELECTION**

This certificate establishes the undersigned as a participant in the county's Election Observer Program. This certificate does not establish the undersigned as a representative of the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk.

Observer: _____

Organization: _____

I have read and understand the observer guidelines set forth by Los Angeles County in its Election Observer Panel Plan, submitted to the California Secretary of State.

Signature _____ Date _____



**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
REGISTRAR-RECORDER/COUNTY CLERK**

**POTENTIAL ELECTION DAY COMPLAINTS
February 5th Presidential Primary Election**

Observation	Suggested Responses
1. Polling place does not open on time	Determine whether an inspector or clerks are present Look for "Notice of Polling Place Change" Contact RR-CC Liaison
2. It's mid-day and polling place is not open	Look for "Notice of Polling Place Change" Contact RR-CC Liaison
3. No inspector is present at the time of opening the polls	Some inspectors do run late or cancel the day of. All clerks however are trained to ensure that voting never stops. Before calling RR-CC verify that voting is taking place and ask Clerks if RR-CC has already been notified.
4. Multilingual materials are not available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All polling places receive multilingual materials in their supply box. • Ask inspector if materials were received. If they were not received or inspector refuses to display for viewing contact RR-CC. • If materials are simply displayed in a manner not accessible for easy viewing. Politely "suggest" if they can be displayed in alternative location. Remember all polling places vary in size and configuration, poll workers do the best they can.