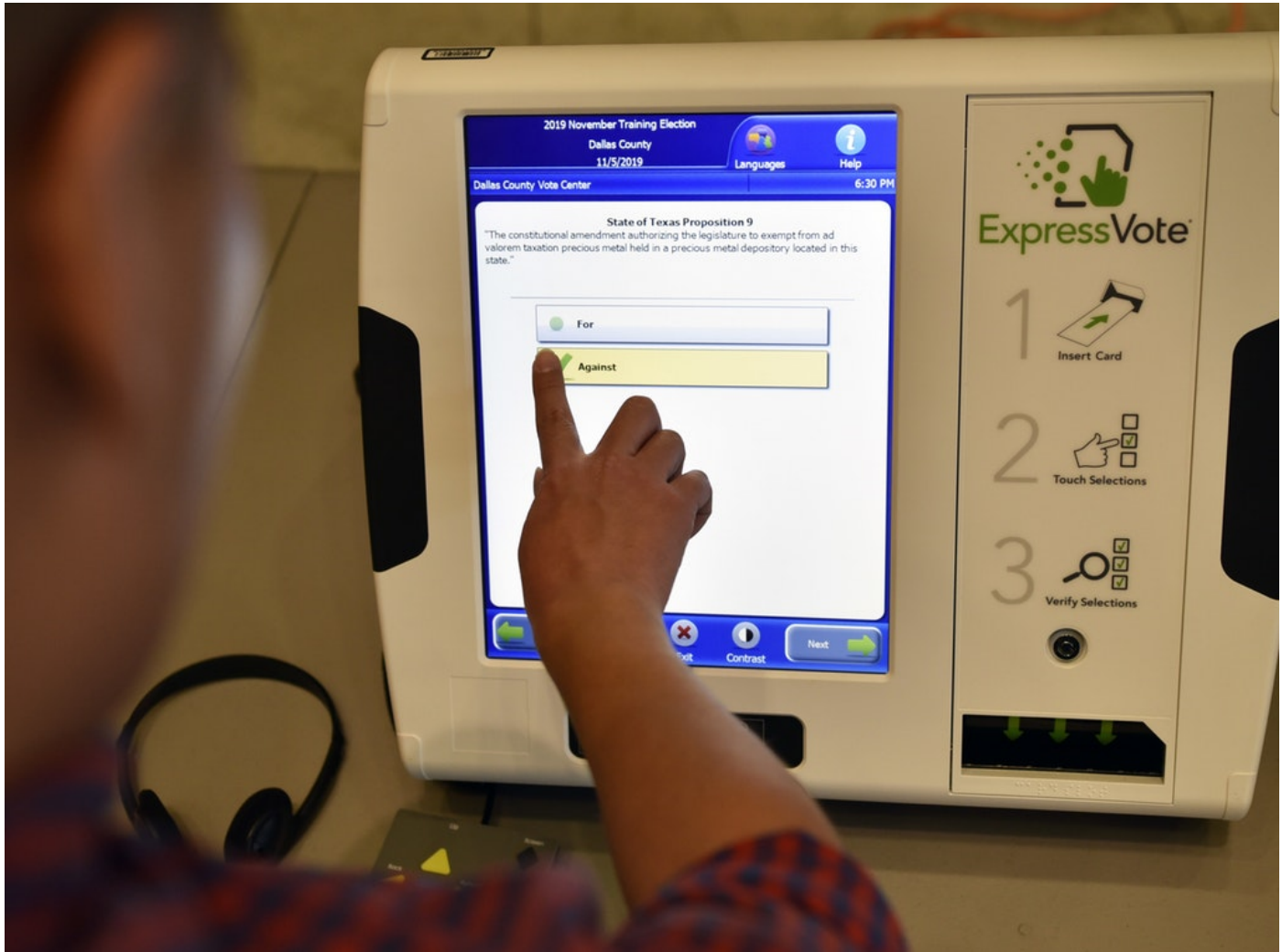


DALLAS COUNTY ELECTIONS

Voters to see 2 big changes

On the way out are paper ballots and assigned precincts



Omar Jimenez of Dallas tried a new touch screen voting machine during a recent demonstration in Mesquite. (Ben Torres/Special Contributor)

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Dallas County elections are set for a major upgrade in November.

Beginning this fall, voters will be able to cast their ballots at any polling location in the county, instead of at an assigned precinct. And they'll use new touch screens, instead of paper ballots, to mark their decisions.

The sweeping changes this year — a dress rehearsal of sorts before the 2020 election, when turnout is expected to be at historic levels — aim to expand access and make voting easier. But they come with substantial risks, experts warn. Some counties that have switched have seen long wait times and lower turnout — especially among Hispanic voters.

With Dallas and eight other counties making the switch this year to what's known as "countywide voting," nearly 75% of Texas voters live in a county that has abandoned the traditional precinct system.

The nine counties making the switch this year will be required to submit proof to the state that their elections were carried out successfully in order to continue using the new system.

"You can do this right," said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political scientist at the University of Houston who has studied voting centers and election turnout in Texas. "But counties have to be wary."

The overhaul in Dallas comes amid a national conversation about voting access and election security. Texas is one of several states that have taken steps in recent years to tighten restrictions on voting, including a new law passed this year that all but prohibits pop-up voting locations that were popular at high school football games and on college campuses. And it's one of 14 states that allow paperless elections, despite ardent warnings from security experts.

Why switch?

Counties across Texas have slowly shifted toward voting centers since the state Legislature gave them permission to do so in 2005. The idea is simple — and for voters who have voted early, familiar: Vote anywhere you like. Showing up in the wrong location will no longer be a problem. In 2018, nearly 500 Dallas County ballots were rejected because individuals voted in the wrong precinct.

The shift to countywide polling locations has been of interest here for several years. At the same time, Dallas County's opted to upgrade its election infrastructure, a \$30 million investment to replace machines and computers that were more than two decades old.

Dallas County Commissioner Elba Garcia, who pushed for the shift to voting centers, said the community was clear that it wanted a paper trail, so the county purchased machines that create one.

"I believe voting centers are the first step in the right direction toward 21st century voting," Garcia said. "With voting centers, you'll be able to vote wherever you are. Going to a wedding in Richardson? No excuse!"

Another rationale for voting centers is cost savings. Counties that make the shift often consolidate the number of polling locations to more high-traffic areas and community centers such as police stations, schools and libraries. State law allows counties to slash the number of polling locations by 35% the first year and up to a total of 50% the following year.

That worries some political scientists and community activists. It disrupts long-established voting patterns and makes it more difficult for voters with limited mobility.

Effects on turnout

To cut down on confusion, the county will keep nearly all of its existing polling locations in place for now.

That's a smart decision, said Rottinghaus.

He and his research partner Jeronino Cortina studied voting patterns in seven counties that switched to voting centers in 2014. They found that increasing distance between a voter and a polling center leads to a decrease in the probability the voter will turn out. And the decrease is most apparent in the Hispanic community and with rural voters. About 40% of Dallas County residents are Hispanic.

In the counties they studied, a voter was 60% to 70% less likely to vote after the switch than in a previous election with the precinct model.

"You have to be very careful of where the polling places go," Rottinghaus said.

Dallas County will use the 2019 and 2020 elections to measure voter intensity to determine whether to consolidate voting locations for future elections, officials said.

Kimberly Olsen, a political field director for the political nonprofit the Texas Organizing Project, is worried that will lead to closing locations in neighborhoods with historic low voter turnout — likely in low-income neighborhoods and those with a high density of blacks and Latinos.

Olsen argues rather than closing locations, the county and other officials should use the data as an opportunity to identify areas where voters need more encouragement to vote.

"We need advertising on buses. We need voting at major transportation hubs. We need voting locations where people are. Every Walmart should be a voting location," she said. "We need to make it easier for people in those neighborhoods to vote — not harder."

"It's not our intent" to dramatically cut back on voting locations, said Toni Pippins-Poole, Dallas County's top elections officer. Rather, the county will be more strategic when it comes time to consolidate.

New machines

The biggest change you'll notice on Election Day is how you vote.

When you enter the voting center, a clerk will ask for identification. After confirming more information and signing an affidavit, you'll be given a long sheet of eggshell white glossy paper. On the top will be a bar code that includes your precinct information and all elections you're eligible to vote in.

You'll insert the paper into a machine with a touch screen called a ballot marker. It will scan the bar code and the screen will begin to display your ballot, one question at a time.

After you make all of your selections, you'll have a chance to review your choices on the screen. If you made a mistake, you can go back. When everything looks right, you'll print your ballot.

Out pops that sheet of paper with your decisions spelled out in words and bar codes. This will be the last chance you have to review your ballot to ensure its accuracy. If something is wrong, you'll need to let an election clerk know right away so they can help you fix it.

After you're confident you've made the right choices, you'll insert your ballot into a counter that will scan your decisions.

"It beats the circling with the ink pen," said Rob Abraham, a 75-year-old Mesquite voter who checked out the new equipment at a recent demonstration. "I like that it's just one question at a time. For someone like my folks, it will be less overwhelming and allow them to focus on one question at a time."

Another thing that Abraham likes about the new ballot marking machines that voters use to make their decisions is that they are not connected to the internet.

"Anything that touches the internet can be messed with," he said.

Paper trail

Election fraud and security was a top concern for Dallas County officials as they moved forward with voting changes. While election security experts say the analog pen and paper method is the least vulnerable to tampering, Dallas did at least select a machine that creates a paper trail.

It didn't have to. Texas is one of eight states that allow paperless voting. According to Politico, more than a quarter of the state's counties will use paperless voting machines despite ample warnings from experts.

Any electronic election machine Dallas County could have purchased would come with potential flaws, said Edgardo Cortes, an election security adviser at the Brennan Center for Justice and the former Virginia commissioner of elections.

There are no federal regulations on these machines. And while the company Dallas County purchased the machines from, ES&S, has federal and state certification, those voluntary standards are more than a decade old.

"There are no requirements about knowing who owns them, no mandates on cyber security. No independent auditing," Cortés said.

He said the county should put in place multiple rigorous audits after the election to ensure accuracy. One audit, known as a risk-assessment audit, requires officials to manually check a statistical sample of paper ballots to ensure the results were accurate.

In the meantime, he suggested Dallasites take every opportunity to review the accuracy of their ballots: "Voters should make sure the selections that come out of the machine are what they wanted, the selections they actually made and intended to make."

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