The 2006 Colorado Seventh Congressional District Registered Voter Election Administration Report

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Lonna Rae Atkeson

Study Background

In 2006, the University of New Mexico and Colorado State University collaborated to field a post- election mixed-mode (Internet and mail) survey in two of the most anticipated competitive congressional races in the county: New Mexico's First Congressional District (NMCD1) and Colorado's Seventh Congressional District (COCD7). We were interested in learning about how citizens interact with the election administration process and providing that information to policy makers and other interested actors.. Both New Mexico and Colorado have recently gone through myriad reforms in their voting laws in response to interest group pressure to create fair, accurate and voter-verifiable election administration systems, making these states excellent choices for studying public opinion regarding election reform. New Mexico, for example, is the first state to move from a predominantly electronic voting system to one that mandated optical scan bubble paper ballots statewide, with the intent of providing a paper trail so that elections could be audited for accuracy. Furthermore, New Mexico passed legislation to implement a statewide 2% audit, beginning in 2008, to ensure the accuracy and fairness of election outcomes. Meanwhile, Colorado has been the frontrunner in the implementation of many innovative changes, including vote centers, and recent changes to the law mandate a paper trail to ensure voter integrity. Both states have also been early adopters of early voting as well as no excuse absentee voting, resulting in many voters choosing to cast their ballots prior to Election Day. In addition, we were involved in observing and collecting data in these contests and so wished to augment that deeply qualitative knowledge of the district with a quantitative survey.[1]

Part I. Voter Experience with Ballots, Precincts, and Poll Workers

The voting experience is a key factor in understanding voter confidence. Experience with the ballot, the polling site, and interactions with poll workers are the objective experiences the voter has with the voting process. These experiences form the core components of the local factors that influence voter confidence. When voters have problems voting—for example, because the ballot is confusing, or too long, or poll workers are unhelpful—they are likely to feel less confident that their vote will be

[1] See Lonna Rae Atkeson and Lorraine Tafoya, 2007, "Close, but Not Close Enough: Democrats Lose Again by the Slimmest of Margins in New Mexico's First Congressional District," and Kyle L. Saunders and Robert J. Duffy, "The 2006 7th Congressional District Race," In *War Games: Issues and Resources in the Battle for Control of Congress*, edited by David Magleby and Kelly Patterson, Provo: Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy, Brigham Young University. (Atkeson & Tofoya can be found at: www.unm.edu/~atkeson).

counted. Therefore, we begin our report by an examination of attitudes surrounding the voting experience.

The average time it took a COCD07 voter to complete their largely touch screen ballots either early or on Election Day was about 10.5 minutes; NMCD1 voters, by comparison, almost exclusively using bubble paper ballots and possessing longer ballots due to initiative measures, averaged significantly shorter at 12.5 minutes ($p < .05$). Interestingly, Colorado absentee voters took substantially longer to fill out their optical scan absentee ballot, averaging 31 minutes to New Mexico's 27 minutes. This suggests that bubble paper ballots on average take longer to complete than touch screen ballots but the overall difference of a few minutes is not substantively large and likely inconsequential.

Overall, New Mexicans and Coloradoans thought their ballot was not confusing. We asked, "How confusing did you find your ballot?" Table 1 shows that over three in five of voters (62.6%) did not find their ballot at all confusing, although about one-in-ten found it somewhat (10.9%) or very (1.6) confusing. However, when we compare New Mexico optical scan voters to Colorado touch screen voters, we find that Colorado voters were significantly less confused. The average early or Election Day score on a 4 point scale, where 1 is very confusing and 4 is not at all confusing (a lower score represents more confusion) for Colorado was 3.65 but for New Mexicans it was 3.50. Interestingly, absentee voters in Colorado were significantly more confused ($p < .001$) than Colorado voters using a touch screen machine, yet there was no difference between absentee and early or Election Day voters in New Mexico ($p > .05$). This suggests that the optical scan ballot is likely slightly more confusing than touch screen voting systems.

Table 1. How Confusing did you find your ballot?

	New Mexico	Colorado
Very confusing	1.1	1.6
Somewhat confusing	13.6	10.9
Not too confusing	20.6	24.9
Not at all confusing	64.7	62.6
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean Election Day voters	3.50	3.65
Mean Absentee voters	3.47	3.39

When we asked about problems at the polls, we found that Coloradoans have had very few problems with voting. Overall, about one in seven voters (13.3%) have ever had a problem at the polls. The most commonly reported problems were (1) not being able to find the polling place, (2) having to vote provisionally, (3) problems with absentee ballots and (4) not finding their name on the registration list/problems registering. One voter indicated that they lacked proper identification and were denied the right to vote. In the open-ended responses it became very clear that there were a variety of complaints about the absentee ballot. In many cases it never arrived, arrived too late, or included poor instructions. Colorado counties may want to consider looking carefully at their

absentee ballot procedures, given the high numbers of voters who choose this option and the relatively large number of complaints with the procedures.

In 2006 Colorado voters were required to show some form of photo or non photo-identification. This appeared to work very well as nearly all (95%) of Election Day and early voters presented some form of identification. The Colorado application of its voter photo and non photo identification requirements appears to have gone smoothly compared to New Mexico's identification laws that included simply stating your name, address, birth year and last 4 social security numbers. In New Mexico, about only about two thirds indicated they had to show some form of identification.

Table 2. What type of voter identification did you have to show?

I didn't have to show any identification	5.4
I did have to show identification	94.6
Total	100.0

Voters who choose to vote early or on Election Day must find their vote center or polling site, wait in line and must interact with poll workers. These experiences also influence voter confidence. Very few voters had problems finding their polling location. Only 2.6% of early and Election Day voters had problems finding their polling site and this was equivalent to what we found in the New Mexico sample. There were differences, however, by voting method in the experience individuals had waiting in line. NMCD1 voters who voted early waited in line on average six times longer than those who chose to vote on Election Day. The average NMCD1 voter waited over 40 minutes in early voting lines compared to 7.5 minutes ($p < .001$) on Election Day. Interestingly, in COCD7 early voters waited on average only 7.5 minutes to cast their ballot, but Election Day voters waited on average 13.5 minutes ($p > .05$). This suggests that more needs to be done to make Election Day voting more efficient. In open-ended responses several Colorado voters complained about excessive waits in voting lines. Overall, COCD7 voters found their poll workers to be very (72.9%) or somewhat (17.9) helpful; very few found them not too (4.4) or not at all helpful (2.1).

Table 3. How helpful were the poll worker at your voting location?

Very helpful	72.9
Somewhat helpful	17.9
Not too helpful	4.4
Not at all helpful	2.1
DK/NS	5.7

Part II. Voter Confidence

We focus our attention here on three specific measures of voter confidence. The first asked, "How confident are you that YOUR VOTE in the November 2006 election will be counted as you intended." The second asked, "How confident are you that the touch-screen ballot sued to record votes will provide an accurate reflection of all the

votes. The third asked, "How confident are you that the bubble paper ballot used to record votes will prove an accurate reflection of ALL THE VOTES?" Table 4 shows that voters were more confident that their own vote would be counted as intended than all the votes either cast on a touch screen or paper ballot machine. Also, clearly voters have greater confidence in paper ballots being counted than touch screen ballots. Although two thirds (66.4%) of voters are very (20.4%) or somewhat confident (46%) in paper ballots only about half (50.6%) of voters were very (20.5%) or somewhat confident (30.1%) in touch screen machines.

Table 4. Voter Confidence that Personal Vote or All the Votes will be Counted as Intended

	Personal Vote	All the Votes Touch Screen	All the Votes Paper Ballot
Very confident	45.4	20.5	20.4
Somewhat confident	40.6	30.1	46.0
Not too confident	8.2	17.4	18.4
Not at all confident	3.7	13.7	7.2
DK/NS	2.1	18.4	8.0

Previous work shows that the quality of the voting experience influences voters' confidence and the perceptual lens that voters bring to the voting booth through their party identification.[2] The problems in election administration since 2000 and allegations of partisan politics, whether in Florida with Former Secretary of State Katherine Harris or in Ohio with former Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, are likely to have created a perception that problems in election administration favor GOP political outcomes over Democratic ones. Therefore, we expect party identification to structure perceptions of the political process, with Democrats having less voter confidence than Republicans.

We begin by focusing on how the local factors influence voter confidence. Recall that about 13% of COCD7 voters have had some past voting problem. When we compare voter confidence by people who have and have not had a voting problem, we find that voting problems reduce voter confidence in the belief that their personal vote will be counted correctly and that all the votes will be counted correctly. Voters who never had a problem were more confident than voters who had some type of past problem.

Table 5. Voter Confidence in Voter's Vote and All the Votes being Counted by Past Voting Problems

	Personal Vote		All the Votes Touch Screen		All the Votes Paper Ballot	
Problems	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Very confident	36.4	47.7	18.4	26.0	17.6	27.1
Somewhat confident	47.7	40.7	44.7	35.7	50.0	50.4
Not too confident	4.5	8.9	13.2	22.4	26.5	16.9

[2] See Lonna Rae Atkeson and Kyle L. Saunders. 2007, "Voter Confidence: A Local Matter?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* (October, forthcoming). (Article can be found at: www.vote2006.unm.edu).

Not at all confident	11.4	2.8	23.7	15.9	5.9	5.5
Mean Confidence	1.91	1.67	2.42	2.28	2.21	2.00

Helpful poll workers also make a difference in voter perceptions. Table 6 shows that the more helpful poll workers were perceived to be the greater voter confidence in their personal vote being counted. Notice how nearly nine in ten (86.6%) voters who perceived their poll workers as somewhat or very helpful were confident that their vote would be counted correctly. But for those who felt their poll workers were not too or not all helpful six in ten (60%) were very or somewhat confident. A similar relationship (not shown) was found for the measure of voter confidence in all the votes being counted.

Table 6. Voter Confidence that Personal Vote is Counted by Poll Worker Helpfulness

	Not too/Not at All Helpful	Somewhat /Very Helpful
Very/Somewhat confident	60.0	86.6
Not too/Not at all confident	40.0	13.4

A confusing ballot also detracts from the vote experience reducing voters' confidence that their ballots and other voters' ballots will be tabulated accurately. Table 7 shows the results when we crosstabulate personal and touch screen all the vote confidence measures by views that the ballot was confusing. For example, only one third of voters who were somewhat or very confused by their ballot, compared to over half of voters who found their ballot not confusing at all, were very confident their vote was counted. And, although hardly any voters who found their ballot not at all or not too confusing were not at all confident, almost one in ten (8.9%) of voters who found their ballot somewhat or very confusing were not at all confident that their personal ballot would be counted accurately.

Table 7. Voter Confidence in Personal Vote and All the Votes being Counted by Confusing Ballot

	Personal Vote			All the Votes Touch Screen		
	Not at All Confusing	Not Too Confusing	Somewhat or Very Confusing	Not at All Confusing	Not Too Confusing	Somewhat or Very Confusing
Very confident	52.9	34.4	35.6	32.3	12.3	8.8
Somewhat confident	38.3	47.3	48.9	34.9	37.0	50.0
Not too confident	6.2	14.0	6.7	18.2	30.1	26.5
Not at all confident	2.6	4.3	8.9	14.6	20.5	14.7

Table 8 shows how voter confidence is structured by partisanship. We see clear differences between Republicans and Democrats in terms of their own vote and all the votes being counted. Although a majority of Democratic voters are *somewhat* confident their personal vote is counted, over three in five Republican voters were *very* confident

that their personal vote is counted. The represents a substantial difference between partisans in perception. When we examine a model where we control for demographic and other characteristics, we find a larger affect of partisanship on voter confidence in their own vote being counted as intended.[3] The differences are even more substantial when we look at the all the votes questions. Although, a majority of Democrats are not too or not at all confident in all the votes being counted, eight in ten Republicans are very or somewhat confident in all the votes being counted.

Table 8. Voter Confidence in Personal Vote and All the Votes being Counted by Party Identification

	Personal Vote			All the Votes Touch Screen		
	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep
Very confident	33.7	47.5	62.2	11.8	33.3	41.0
Somewhat confident	51.9	35.0	30.1	36.0	30.6	39.3
Not too confident	11.2	10.0	4.2	31.1	5.6	12.8
Not at all confident	3.2	7.5	3.5	21.1	30.6	6.8

Part III. Voter Satisfaction

Ultimately, we are also interested in voter satisfaction. We asked a variety of questions to tap into voters' overall experience. For example, we asked, "How would you rate your overall voting experience? Excellent, good, fair or poor." We found that over nine in ten Colorado voters, compared to eight in ten New Mexico voters, had a good to excellent experience, but some voters had only a fair or poor experience. Coloradoans rated their overall experience slightly higher than did voters in New Mexico ($p < .01$).

Table 9. How Would You Rate your overall Voting Experience by State

	New Mexico	Colorado
Excellent	25.1	34.8
Good	56.8	56.9
Fair	14.3	7.0
Poor	3.8	1.3
Mean	3.03	3.25

We followed up the above question with an open-ended response asking those who rated their experience fair or poor to explain why they did so (see Table 10). The most often provided responses related to (1) distrust with the system, (2) the campaign, (3) long waits, and (4) poll worker problems.

[3] See Atkeson and Saunders 2007.

Table 10. For Those Who Rated their Voting Experience Fair or Poor, Why?

Paper ballots	4.5
Long Wait	13.6
Poll worker problems	13.6
Distrust with system	27.3
Campaign	18.2
Ballot too long	9.1
Other	1.5
Confusing ballot	4.5
Not Sure	4.5

We also asked, "How would you rate your voting experience in this election compared to prior voting experiences? Much more positive, somewhat more positive, about the same, somewhat more negative, or much more negative?" (see Table 11). Although we found that more than two-thirds of people rated their experience about the same or better, when we compare New Mexico optical scan voters to Colorado voters, who used a touch screen system and had paper audit trails for the first time, we find that New Mexicans were significantly less positive. The mean score (a lower score is better) for New Mexico is 3.12 and for Colorado it is 2.83 ($p < .001$). This suggests that voters prefer the ease of a touch screen machine to the cumbersome nature of bubble paper ballots.

Table 11. How Would You Rate Your Voting Experience in this Election Compared to Prior Voting Experiences by State

	New Mexico	Colorado
Much more positive	5.9	9.1
Somewhat more positive	14.0	15.8
About the same	49.5	66.4
somewhat more negative	18.0	5.6
Much more negative	10.8	4.8
Mean Score	3.12	2.83

Part IV. Voter Attitudes toward Voter Identification

Finally, we were interested in how voters felt about voter identification laws. The Help America Vote Act required minimal voter identification laws in states and the Report of the Commission on Federal Election Reforms suggested that federal voting laws require some sort of voter identification. In addition, recent bills in the House increased federal voter identification requirements, including proof of citizenship. Colorado has higher standards than minimum HAVA, which requires non photo or photo identification for all voters. The debate surrounding the issue focuses on the possibility of disenfranchising some voters, who may not have access to appropriate voter identification, versus ensuring the system against voter fraud.

We asked registered voters a simple question, "Do you think that voter identification rules help prevent voter fraud?" About three-quarters (74.5%) of registered

voters thought voter identification rules help prevent voter fraud. Meanwhile about one in seven (13.8%) of registered voters do not think that voter identification rules help prevent voter fraud. And, over one in ten are not sure. We find little differences across this variable demographically, except for partisanship; Democratic identifiers are much less likely to believe that voter identification rules do not prevent fraud.

Table 12. Do you think that voter identification rules help prevent voter fraud?

	Total	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Yes	74.5	66.5	62.2	87.7
No	13.8	17.8	22.2	6.5
DK/NS	11.7	15.7	15.6	5.8

We then asked voters, "Do you think voter identification rules prevent some voters from casting their ballot at the polls?" We find that slightly more than two in four (43.7%) of registered voters agree that voter identification rules may prevent voters from casting a ballot at the polls. About one-third (33.9%) of respondents agree with this statement and nearly another one in five (22.4%) were not sure. This suggests more diversity of opinion than might have been expected. Once gain, we find a strong party difference in attitudes, with almost two thirds (64.1%) of Republican identifiers believing that such measures do not disenfranchise voters, and just a bit over one-quarter (26.8%) of Democrats feeling the same way. Almost a majority (47.4%) of Democrats feel such rules do prevent some voters from casting ballots, while only one in five (20.9%) of Republicans feel the same way.

Table 13. Do you think voter identification rules prevent some voters from casting their ballot at the polls?

	Total	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
No	43.7	26.8	44.5	64.1
Yes	33.9	47.4	22.2	20.9
DK/NS	22.4	25.8	33.3	15.0

When we pitted the two debates against one another, we asked, "Some people argue that voter identification rules prevent some voters from going to the polls, while others argue that voter identification rules prevent voting fraud. Which is more important? Ensuring that everyone who is eligible has the right to vote or protecting the voting system against voter fraud? " Table 14 shows that just over half (50.4) supported voter identification and protecting the system against fraud, but over two in four voters (40.4%) thought it was more important to ensure everyone who is eligible has the right to vote. Moreover, this is a very polarizing and partisan issue. Democrats feel stronger about ensuring everyone has the right to vote and Republicans, and to a lesser extent the independents, feel stronger about protecting the system against voter fraud. These are substantial differences across partisans in terms of attitude preferences.

Table 14. Voter Identification Debate Total Frequency and by Party Identification

	Total	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Ensuring that everyone who is eligible has the right to vote	40.4	58.6	37.8	18.8
Protecting the voting system against voter fraud	50.4	30.4	44.4	76.6
DK/NS	9.2	11.0	17.8	4.5

Conclusion

We examined a series of questions related to voter's attitudes toward Colorado's election administration. We found that **most** people were satisfied and confident in the process. We did, however, find that there were some people who were dissatisfied with the process. In many cases, these problems are fixable through better education of voters and better training of poll workers. We also found that though most people believed that voter identification rules prevent fraud, they were more split, especially by party, on whether that disenfranchised voters and consequently what was the right public policy. In addition to this executive summary, a detailed frequency report related to election administration survey questions is provided below in the methodological appendix, and additional information is available at www.vote2006.unm.edu.

Appendix: Survey Methodology

The 2006 New Mexico Election Administration Survey was based on a random sample of registered voters in Colorado's Seventh Congressional District that was provided by Secretary of State Gigi Dennis after the final registration day for the 2006 general election.[4] Just before Election Day, we sent out letters to our sample respondents requesting their participation in our Election Administration Survey. The letter provided sample respondents with a URL (votenecolorado.unm.edu) and explained that respondents could also request a mail survey and a return self-addressed stamped envelope by contacting us via a toll free number or by calling our offices. Sample registered voters who did not respond were re-contacted three times with a postcard. Sample registered voters who did not respond were re-contacted three times with a postcard. The first postcard was sent November 17, the second was sent December 1, and the final postcard was sent December 19. The response rate for the sample was about 12.1% (n=399), 86.7% chose to answer the Internet survey while 13.3% chose to answer the mail option. The margin of error is plus or minus 4.9%.[5]

Survey questions asked about their election experience (voter confidence, voting problems, method of voting, experience with poll workers, voter satisfaction), their faith in the election process (including the ability of the machines to provide paper audits), their attitudes toward fraud, voter access, voter identification as well as other political attitudes and behaviors including evaluations of the President, the congressional candidates and their local and state election administrators. We also asked several questions related to the congressional race (vote choice, political activity, etc.) and a variety of demographics.

For a full description of the instrument, resulting frequency report and the Colorado executive summary please go to: http://vote2006.unm.edu.

[4] Because this was an election-oriented survey with many questions focusing on voter experience with the election process, our respondents were almost all voters. Only 3% of registered voters who did not turnout for the 2006 election chose to participate.

[5] A detailed examination of how our design fared can be found at: www.vote2006.unm.edu.