

The 2006 New Mexico First Congressional District Registered Voter Election Administration Report

August 11, 2007

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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. Both New Mexico and Colorado have recently undergone 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 election 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.² 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

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 & Tafoya can be found at: www.unm.edu/~atkeson).

² See Lonna Rae Atkeson and Kyle L. Saunders. 2007, "Voter Confidence: A Local Matter?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* (October, forthcoming). Also see: www.vote2006.unm.edu.

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

The average time it took a NMCD1 voter to complete their paper ballot either early or on Election Day was about 12.5 minutes; Colorado voters, by comparison, almost exclusively using touch-screen machines and possessing longer ballots due to initiative measures, averaged significantly shorter at 10.5 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 thought their ballot was not confusing. We asked, "How confusing did you find your ballot?" The survey data shows that nearly two third of voters (64.7%) did not find their ballot at all confusing, although about one-in-seven found it somewhat (13.6%) or very (1.1) 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 New Mexicans have had very few problems with voting. Overall, only 1 in 5 voters has 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, and (3) not finding their name on the registration list. In New Mexico, election officials often consolidate precincts in lower turnout elections to save money. The finding here suggests that either the consolidation or expansion of polling places needs to be better explained to voters so that they know where their polling site is located in each election.

New Mexico law required voter identification in 2006, but voters could use either a physical form of identification or could simply, in a written or verbal statement, attest to their voter name, year of birth and the last 4 numbers on their social security card. We found that about half (65%) of NMCD1 voters had to show some form of identification to vote, while 35% did not. We also have found through more complex modeling that Hispanic voters were more likely to show some form of voter identification than other voters. Combined with the poll worker data, this suggests that while some poll workers were vigorously requiring some form of voter identification, others were not.

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

I didn't have to show any identification	35.3
I did have to show identification	64.7
Total	100.0
Identification used for those asked:	
Driver's License	33.8
Voter Registration card	58.4
Other form of ID	3.4
Driver's license & Other form of ID	.5
Driver's license & Registration card	3.9

In more sophisticated analysis, we examined how the New Mexico rule, allowing for a broad diversity of implementation, was applied. We modeled the influence of race (Hispanic and other non-white), education, income, gender, age, whether they voted early or not, whether they were first time voters, and their partisan registration on whether voters showed some form of identification or not. We found that self-identified Hispanics and men were more likely to show some form of voter identification than non-Hispanics and women and that early voters were less likely to show some form of identification. In addition, in our analysis we substituted Hispanic self-identification for a variable that represented whether or not the voter had a Hispanic surname. Surname offers a strong cue to ethnic identity and as such may be a better representation of how poll workers and others determine Hispanic identity. Substituting this variable for self-identification provided stronger results. A voter who was the median age, education, income, gender (female) and was not Hispanic had a 69% probability of showing some form of voter identification, while the same voter with a Hispanic surname had an 85% probability of showing some form of voter identification, a 16% increase. Even if voters did not realize they were being asked for identification when they testified verbally to their identity, this error in our data should be randomly distributed and therefore we should not see an effect. The fact that we do see an effect, and that it strengthens when we measure Hispanic ethnicity by surname instead of self-identity, suggests that the law was not applied equally across all groups.

When we examine our poll worker data (see www.vote2006.unm.edu for more details), however, we find no evidence that different types of poll workers asked for identification differently. Thus, we do not see that white poll workers were more likely to ask for identification than Hispanic poll workers; statistically both groups asked for voter identification, by their own assessments, equally. Likewise, we see no evidence

that particular partisan groups or other demographic characteristics influenced who asked for identification. Therefore, there is no systematic evidence that specific subgroups of the population applied the law differently; all groups equally applied or misapplied the voter identification laws. Given the political sensitivity of this issue, better poll worker training will be need in future election contests, especially as new laws go into effect for the 2008 election cycle.

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 6.4% of early and Election Day voters had problems finding their polling site and this was equivalent to what we found in the Colorado 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 Colorado 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 early voting more efficient in New Mexico. Overall, NMCD1 voters found their poll workers to be very (60.7%) or somewhat (26.2) helpful; very few found them not too (5.7) or not at all helpful (2.9).

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

Very helpful	60.7
Somewhat helpful	26.2
Not too helpful	5.7
Not at all helpful	2.9
DK/NS	4.5

Part II. Voter Confidence

We focus our attention here on two 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 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.

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

	Personal Vote	All the Votes
Very confident	38.6	20.4
Somewhat confident	43.9	46.0
Not too confident	11.5	18.4
Not at all confident	3.8	7.2
DK/NS	2.2	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.³ 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 20% of NMCD1 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	
	Problems	No Problems	Problems	No Problems
Very confident	28.4	41.9	20.5	22.5
Somewhat confident	46.9	44.4	38.5	52.6
Not too confident	16.0	10.8	30.8	17.6
Not at all confident	8.6	2.8	10.3	7.2
Mean Confidence	2.05	1.74	2.30	2.10

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 over nine in ten voters who perceived their poll workers as very helpful were very (47.8%) or somewhat (43.3%) confident that their vote would be counted correctly. But for those who felt their poll workers were not too or not all helpful not quite six in ten (57.1%) were very (10.7%) or somewhat (46.4%) 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 Helpful	Very Helpful
Very confident	10.7	31.4	47.8
Somewhat confident	46.4	53.5	43.3
Not too confident	32.1	9.3	7.4
Not at all confident	10.7	5.8	1.5

³ See Atkeson and Saunders, 2007.

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 both confidence measures by views that the ballot was confusing. For example, only one in five voters who were somewhat or very confused by their ballot, compared to over two in five voters who found their ballot not confusing at all, were 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, about one in seven 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		
	Not at All Confusing	Not Too Confusing	Somewhat or Very Confusing	Not at All Confusing	Not Too Confusing	Somewhat or Very Confusing
Very confident	44.6	36.0	20.3	27.1	15.7	10.0
Somewhat confident	44.6	50.0	40.6	51.9	55.4	36.7
Not too confident	9.1	11.6	23.4	14.7	26.5	33.3
Not at all confident	1.7	2.3	15.6	6.4	2.4	20.0

We asked voters to agree or disagree with the following statement, "It took too long to vote with the ballot I used." We then compared those who agree, neither agree nor disagree, or who disagree with this statement with their vote confidence. Table 8 shows that the perception of how long it took to complete the ballot affects voter confidence, especially confidence in all the votes being counted. Notice that voters who agreed with the statement were less confident than voters who disagreed with the statement.

Table 8. Voter Confidence in Personal Vote and All the Votes by Whether or Not It Took Too Long to Complete the Ballot

	Personal Vote			All the Votes		
	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Very confident	37.6	31.9	42.4	13.7	14.9	31.7
Somewhat confident	41.1	58.3	46.2	43.9	56.8	52.2
Not too confident	16.3	5.6	9.8	28.1	24.3	12.8
Not at all confident	5.0	4.2	1.6	14.4	4.1	3.3

Table 9 shows how voter confidence is structured by partisanship. We see very little difference between Republicans and Democrats in terms of their own vote being counted but Democrats are particularly less confident when we examine how they feel about all the voters. 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.⁴

Table 9. Voter Confidence in Personal Vote and All the Votes being Counted by Party Identification

	Personal Vote			All the Votes		
	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep
Very confident	42.0	25.0	39.9	25.9	15.2	18.4
Somewhat confident	46.4	46.9	43.5	43.9	42.4	52.8
Not too confident	9.4	15.6	13.1	28.1	27.3	18.4
Not at all confident	2.2	12.5	3.6	14.4	15.2	10.4

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 three-quarters of voters had a good to excellent experience, but some voters had only a fair or poor experience. However, Coloradoans rated their overall experience slightly higher than did voters in New Mexico ($p < .01$).

Table 10. 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 11). The most often provided responses related to (1) the new paper ballot system, (2) a long wait, (3) poll worker problems, and (4) distrust with the system. For those who rated the system poorly, the cumbersomeness of the new paper ballot system was not well-liked. For example, one voter said, "felt like we went back 100 year in time using paper ballots- which, in my opinion, are more easily tampered with than electronic ballots." Another voter said, "No ID check, long wait, plus the use of manual marking of bubbles which took much longer" A third voter offered that, "The prior machines were faster and easier." However, with time, voters may come to appreciate the paper audit trail, which has the potential to decrease the voting system against fraud. Indeed, our post election survey data suggests that voters perceive paper ballots to have a better paper audit trail than touch-screen devices.

⁴ See Atkeson and Saunders, 2007.

Table 11. For Those Who Rated their Voting Experience Fair or Poor, Why?

Paper ballots	33.8
Long Wait	29.2
Poll worker problems	10.8
Distrust with system	9.2
Campaign	4.6
Ballot print too small	4.6
Ballot too long	3.1
Campaign outside polling stations	1.5
County election officials	1.5
Confusing ballot	1.5

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 12). 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 ($p < .001$).

Table 12. 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. New Mexico's legislature has long had debates about voter identification laws and a new program will be implemented in 2008 to ensure proper voter identification. 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?” Seven in ten registered voters thought voter identification rules help to prevent voter fraud. Meanwhile about one in seven (16.7%) 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 party identification; Democratic identifiers are much less likely to believe that voter identification rules do not prevent fraud.

Table 13. Do you think that voter identification rules help prevent voter fraud?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Yes	69.9	62.6	63.3	81.6
No	16.7	22.7	14.3	8.0
DK/NS	13.4	14.7	18.4	10.3

We then asked voters, “Do you think voter identification rules prevent some voters from casting their ballot at the polls?” We find that about one-quarter (25.5%) of registered voters agree that voter identification rules may prevent voters from casting a ballot at the polls. About half (51.2%) of respondents disagreed with this statement and nearly another one quarter (23.3%) were not sure, a rather high margin of “DK/NS.” However, what makes this a majority position is the rather large hegemony of opinion by Republicans compared to Democrats and independents. Once again, we find a strong party difference in attitudes, with only a little more than one in ten voters (13.3%) Republicans believing that voter identification rules prevent some voters from casting ballots, while over one-third (34.3%) of Democrats and nearly one quarter (24.5%) of independents feeling the same way.

Table 14. Do you think voter identification rules prevent some voters from casting their ballot at the polls?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Yes	25.5	34.3	24.5	13.3
No	51.2	42.3	53.1	63.0
DK/NS	23.3	23.4	22.4	23.7
N	462	239	49	173

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 15 shows that just over half (52.2) supported voter identification, but over two in four voters (41.4%) 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 15. Voter Identification Debate Total Frequency and by Party Identification

	Total	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Ensuring that everyone who is eligible has the right to vote	42.8	56.1	37.5	25.3
Protecting the voting system against voter fraud	52.2	38.0	54.2	71.8
DK/NS	5.0	5.9	8.3	26.8

Conclusion

We examined a series of questions related to voter’s attitudes toward New Mexico’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 New Mexico's First Congressional District that was provided by Secretary of State Rebecca Vigil-Giron after the final registration day for the 2006 general election.⁵ 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 (votewmexico.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. 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 15.3% (n=471), 4 in 5 of respondents (79%) chose to answer the Internet survey while the remaining 1 in 5 respondents (21%) chose to answer the mail option.⁶ The margin of error is plus or minus 4.5%.

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>.

⁵ 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.

⁶ A detailed examination of how our design fared can be found at: www.vote2006.unm.edu.