

League of Women Voters of Nashville
August 2011 Metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County Election
Poll-Watching Observation Summary Report

The League of Women Voters of Nashville (LWVN) conducted a poll-watching project during August 2011 Nashville-Davidson County election. The Voter Services Committee organized the effort and recruited LWVN members to participate. The committee also recruited participants from other area community groups and organizations. Poll watchers observed voting activities during both the early voting period and on Election Day. All observers completed the "Poll Watcher Checklist" that was utilized in previous poll-watching projects (the checklist is available at www.lwvnashville.org). This ensured that observers were assessing similar issues and that observations would be fairly easy to compile.

Observers were particularly interested in issues relating to consistency of operations, voter experiences, overall organization of voting processes, and voter accessibility. Election Day precinct assignments were made to ensure coverage of the greatest possible Nashville-Davidson County area. As in previous poll-watching efforts, all poll watchers wore LWV buttons while in the precincts. This identified participants to both poll workers and the public and increased the LWV's visibility in the community. All poll watchers were oriented to the process and purpose of poll watching through written materials from the LWV and the County Election Commission. Voter Services Committee co-chairs made personal contact with poll watchers who desired further guidance.

Polling Place

Most observers reported that polling places were easily identifiable and/or marked with signs. Entrances at most polling places were accessible to persons with disabilities but observers did note a few issues. One observer noted that the entrance to the polling place had no automatic door opener. A mother with a twin stroller had trouble getting through the door and the observer said a person using a wheelchair or with a disability also might have trouble entering. Another observer remarked that voters had to climb stairs to enter the polling place. Poll workers told her that there were other entrances, however, these were not marked and the poll workers did not know whether the alternative entrances had ramps. These logistical problems could present accessibility problems for some voters.

One observer noted that her assigned polling place lacked parking in front of the building. This observer also reported that the early voting location was a community center and another function was taking place exacerbating the parking problem. Several precincts had other activities going on during early voting and on Election Day. At another site, also a community center, kids were skating through the hallway, which presented a possible threat to voters' safety. The noise created by the skates also made communication difficult. At a site located in a high school, sports practice was taking place in the gym adjacent to the voting location. When the practice session was over students began walking through the polling place and loitering. The Officer of Elections said there was nothing that could be done about it and that it was worse when school was in session.

No candidates were seen in polling places and candidate activities generally remained behind the 100 foot line. One Officer of Elections did note that there had been an issue with candidate supporters attempting to enter the polling place to use the restroom with their campaign shirts clearly visible. The officer directed these people to use the restrooms in the front of the building. The observer also saw a candidate supporter enter the polling place to ask about the vote count. The Officer of Elections informed her that she could not be inside the precinct without poll-watcher credentials.

Organization and Flow of the Process

Most observers noted that the flow of the voting process was smooth, however, one observer noted that the order of activities could have been clearer. This observer saw several voters who were confused about which desk to approach first. The observer recommended that a “please wait here” sign also would have been helpful since some voters were unsure about where to stand while waiting to vote. In some precincts, there was no sign posted to identify the change of address clerk.

Machine arrangement was an important issue discussed by several observers. One observer noted that the arrangement of the machines required incoming voters to walk behind the other machines to get to their voting machine, allowing them to see the screens of those already engaged in voting. The poll workers said that electric plug and cord placement prevented them from rearranging the machines. Another observer reported that the screens of all the voting machines faced the room rather than the wall and, therefore, were observable by anyone in the room. In a few other locations machines were located very close together and it was difficult for some voters to maneuver around them.

Most observers noted that the path to voting machines was safe and free of electrical cords. Two observers, however, reported that voters had to step over unsecured cords to reach certain machines. At one of these precincts, a voter tripped on a cord and unplugged the machine. The Officer of Elections in this instance said that the church housing the precinct only allowed blue painters tape to be used to secure cords. Poll workers did not have this type of tape and therefore were unable to tape cords down.

Poll Workers

Observers were complimentary about poll workers and election officials, reporting that poll workers functioned well as a team and were conscientious about their duties. Observers noted that application clerks, registration clerks, and change of address (COA) clerks worked efficiently and politely and were generally consistent in following procedures. The Officer of Elections was clearly visible in most precincts. One observer did note that the Officer of Elections was not on the premises for 50 minutes; apparently she took a lunch break off premises.

Poll watchers generally felt welcome at the precincts though there was some confusion about poll watcher credentials at one precinct. In this location, the Officer of Elections called the Election Commission to verify the poll watcher’s credentials. Only one observer reported feeling unwelcome at the precinct. This observer said that the Officer of Elections asked the COA clerk if the poll watcher was allowed to be present when the

votes were tabulated and further told the clerk that he did not want the poll watcher there during the counting. The poll watcher did not attempt to stay so it is unknown whether he would have encountered resistance from the official.

Voters with Registration Issues

Observers did witness some voters who claimed to be registered but who were not on the registered voter list. Observers witnessed several voters that were in the wrong locations due to precinct reorganization. These voters were assisted by the COA clerk and directed to the proper voting location. One observer saw a voter claim that she registered through a human resource agency, but she was not on the rolls and therefore was not allowed to vote.

A few poll watchers witnessed the issuance of provisional ballots, though one observer reported that she saw an Officer of Elections seem to dissuade a voter from using a provisional ballot. He told the voter that it took a long time to process a provisional ballot at the precinct. One voter was turned away because he did not have any document with a signature. The officer told the poll watcher that the voter had dementia and couldn't or wouldn't be able to sign an affidavit.

Casting the Vote

All observers noted short wait times to vote and many observers said there was no wait time. There were a few instances in which observers reported that one worker "helped" voters with questions even when a second worker was not present. More than one observer noted that a worker set a cartridge down on a table unattended.

One problem observed at several precincts involved inconsistencies in answering voter questions about the fairgrounds referendum.

1. One elderly voter asked what ratification meant. The two machine operators told him it meant in favor, not against.
2. Another poll worker told a voter that ratification meant approval but would not answer any other questions.
3. "Ratification means saving the fairgrounds" was written on the chalkboard in one precinct. The observer asked about this and the statement was then erased.
4. A voter asked for clarification on the fairgrounds referendum and the poll worker replied that he "could not help him with that."

In addition, one observer noted that a few persons were confused about the process of choosing five Metro Council Members-At-Large.

Voting Machine Problems

Machines were functional according to poll watcher reports. In one precinct a machine did not light up the selection at the voter's touch. A poll worker said this machine did this occasionally and the worker was able to resolve the issue. Another observer also witnessed voting machine fail to respond to voter touch. The poll worker cancelled the vote and escorted the voter to another machine. The machine was working again within the hour.

Voter Experience

Observers reported that some voters were unsure of when they had actually completed the voting process. Several voters had to be told to “push the button a second time” to actually cast the vote. One observer said that a voter walked away before pushing the “vote” button. The voter had left the premises, but the workers assumed he meant to vote and pushed “vote.”

Observers reported that people with disabilities were able to vote easily and that workers appropriately accommodated these voters. As mentioned earlier, in one precinct the machines were very close together and at least one voter had difficulty getting to the machine. Workers were very helpful and responsive to this voter. Several observers noted that some people with disabilities were able to vote with portable machines. Observers also witnessed the use of assistance forms. One observer, however, saw a person become upset when told that she and her daughter (who needed assistance) would need to fill out the appropriate form. These voters left without voting.

Other Issues

There was some confusion regarding the Tennessee Voter Identification Act that will take effect on January 1, 2012. Some observers saw voters being given an information sheet about the new law that was published by the State Division of Elections. Other observers reported that these forms were not available at the precincts. Some observers noted that voters asked workers about requirements of the new law and wanted to know how they could obtain the required ID. Workers seemed unclear about the requirements. One voter who asked about this became agitated when informed that a photo ID would be required next year, and said: “That’s too bad. I have one but my partner doesn’t, I guess he’ll have to not vote.”

Recommendations

LWVN encourages the Davidson County Election Commission to remain vigilant to keeping elections open, transparent and accessible for all who are eligible to vote. The LWVN recommends actions in three areas to achieve this goal.

1. ***Voter ID Act Education*** - While action to educate voters about the new Voter ID requirements was observed at some polls, it was also noted to be absent at many precincts. LWVN recommends that thorough preparation and training of poll workers and voters be pursued to limit confusion, barriers, and long voting lines in the next election.
2. ***Training*** - Poll workers vary in their understanding of the role and rights of registered poll watchers. LWVN recommends briefing election officers and poll workers about poll watcher roles and rights in future training sessions.
3. ***Accessibility*** - Accessibility is key to democratic elections and LWVN recommends improving methods of arranging, securing and facilitating machine access for voters at all polling sites.

Our Mission Statement

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

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