



What's Working and What's Not: Voter Perspectives on Los Angeles County Election Administration

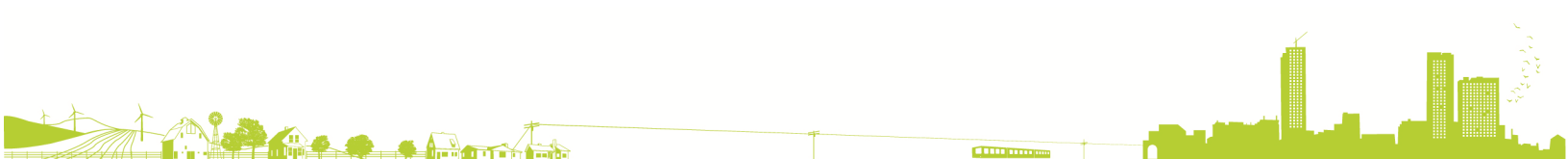
PART 1

Preliminary Findings – June 3, 2014

Prepared by

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A project in collaboration with



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ABOUT THE GREENLINING INSTITUTE

The Greenlining Institute works to bring the American Dream within reach of all, regardless of race or income. In a nation where people of color will make up the majority of our population by 2043, we believe that America will prosper only if communities of color prosper. The Claiming Our Democracy Program strives to ensure that communities of color and low-income Americans are able to make their voices heard in our electoral process and the halls of government. We see this as critical to achieving policy outcomes that provide opportunities for all to thrive. To learn more, visit www.greenlining.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank a number of people who made this project possible.

First, we would like to commend Dean Logan, Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk for his courageous leadership and partnership. We would like to thank Efrain Escobedo for seeing an opportunity and working with The Greenlining Institute to develop the vision for this project. We thank Jeff Klein for his project support and coordination, and all of the staff and volunteers who spent hours on the day of the Election to survey and interview voters: Alberto Avalos, Adrian Avelar, Patty Corona, Daniella DeLea, Helen Medina, Angie Meserkhani, David Lee, Mike Tucker, Jose Heras, and Stephanie Babb. A special thank you to Braelan Murry and Bruce Mirken of The Greenlining Institute for their video and communications support throughout this project.

We would like to acknowledge the Future of California Elections Collaborative (FOCE) for providing the space to share ideas and build relationships that ultimately fostered the partnership that formed between The Greenlining Institute and the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk to embark on this project. We have especially appreciated the support of the FOCE staff Doug Chapin, Astrid Garcia, and Stefani Jimenez. To learn more about FOCE, visit futureofCAelections.org.

We would also like to thank Catherine Hazelton and the James Irvine Foundation for their leadership in establishing the FOCE Collaborative and their generous support which made this project possible.

the **James Irvine**
foundation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction and Methodology	 4-6
Summary of Findings	
<i>Provisional Voting</i>	 6-7
<i>Vote by Mail</i>	 7
<i>Voting Technology</i>	 8
<i>Pollworkers</i>	 9-10
<i>Language Assistance</i>	 11-13
<i>Voter Information</i>	 13-14
Conclusion	 14

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INTRODUCTION

The Future of California Elections Collaborative (FOCE), established in 2011, is a partnership between county election officials, good government and civil rights groups with an interest in improving the future of California elections for all. FOCE provides a space for information-sharing and problem-solving across these sectors in an effort to harness the collective expertise of the group and improve outcomes for voters. The project outlined in this report emerged from dialogues the authors had as members of FOCE.

The Greenlining Institute had shared with the other members of FOCE that it was about to embark on an effort to gather individual stories from voters about what is working and what is not in the voting process. Greenlining sought to highlight the impacts of certain best practices on the voting experience, and to identify and humanize ongoing challenges or barriers faced. Hearing this plan, the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder's Office approached Greenlining about a potential partnership.

The Registrar's Office had noticed a trend of consistently lower than average voter turnout in certain places throughout the county over the past several years. Oftentimes they were communities of color with a high concentration of limited-English proficient voters. In an effort to ensure that nothing about the election administration process was contributing to these results, officials approached The Greenlining Institute about the possibility of working together to collect voter feedback on what is working and what is not in these communities within Los Angeles County. The opportunity to work with Los Angeles County seemed like a natural fit for Greenlining considering the communities in question.

Leveraging our collective resources, we designed a pilot project to collect voter feedback on the process during the June 3, 2014 primary election.

Our project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Collect feedback from voters about what is working and what isn't working in the voting process.
- Record interviews with voters that could be used for training and informational purposes

METHODOLOGY

The project consisted of two types of voter feedback collection: 1) a survey, and 2) recorded video interviews. Both methods were deployed at poll locations across 9 communities in Los Angeles County, which were identified by the Registrar's Office as having had historically low turnout or high rates of provisional voting. Our June 3 pilot project visited a sampling of precincts that met these criteria, located in Artesia, Bellflower, Bell Gardens, Hawaiian Gardens, Huntington Park, Koreatown, Monterey Park, Paramount, and Santa Fe Springs. Many other communities that also have low turnout or high levels of provisional voting were not included in this pilot study.

Surveys were administered in Survey Monkey using WiFi-enabled tablets. The electronic survey was available only in English, but translated paper copies of the survey were available in Chinese, Korean, and Spanish, the communities included in the pilot study. Exit survey questions focused on the voters' experiences during the election. Questions focused on voters' perceptions of the pollworkers, provisional voting, ease of the voting technology, availability of language assistance, and usefulness of voter information.

In addition to the survey, outreach teams conducted on-camera video interviews with willing voters. The on-camera interviews allowed us to learn more than what numbers could tell us by giving us insight into what motivates voters, how they think, and why they do, feel, and act the way they do.

The outreach team consisted of 10 individuals (staff and volunteers), deployed in teams of two. We included individuals who were fluent in Chinese, Korean, and Spanish to assist voters with completing the survey in precincts where those languages were widely spoken. One day prior to Election Day, we held a training for the outreach team regarding how to use the camera equipment, interview technique, and best practices for administering surveys.

Survey Participants

A total of 95 voters participated in the survey. We also interviewed 40 voters on-camera, most of whom did not also complete the survey. The demographic breakdown of those interviewed on camera is not included in the survey demographics below.

Race/Ethnicity	
African American	1 %
White (non-Hispanic)	40 %
Asian American	5 %
Latino	49 %
Two or more races	4 %

National Origin	
Native born	65 %
Foreign born	35 %

Age Group	
18-24 years	2 %
25-34 years	15 %
35-44 years	17 %
45-54 years	23 %
55 and older	43 %

Gender	
Male	51 %
Female	49 %

Educational Attainment	
Graduate degree	16 %
Bachelor's degree	25 %
2-yr degree/vocational	24 %
High school / GED	16 %
Less than high school	17 %
Don't know	2 %

Vote Frequency	
Always	75 %
Usually	19 %
Sometimes	7 %
Rarely	0 %
Never	0 %

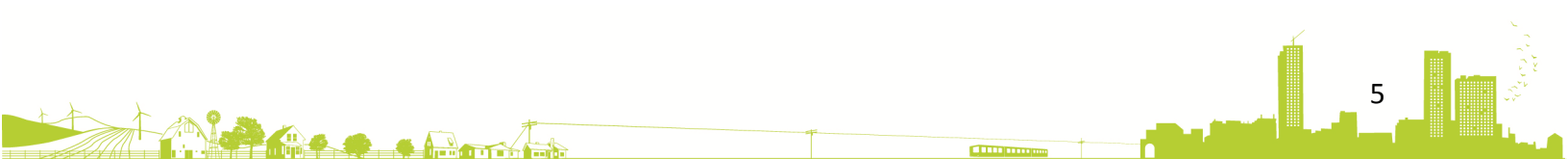
Limitations

Our pilot study had several limitations:

First, this was not a scientific sample of all voters in Los Angeles County. It was a convenience sample of those who turned out in person at particular polling places. The resulting snapshot suggests possible concerns and issues for further study, but cannot be considered a complete picture of all voters' experiences.

The June 3 primary election also had extremely low turnout overall (about 17 percent in Los Angeles County). Because we were targeting precincts with particularly low turnout, we had relatively few voters to survey. Those who did turn out, our survey found, were individuals who vote frequently. Our pilot study was not particularly effective at capturing what infrequent and non-voters think about our elections and what may prevent them from participating.

In addition, because our teams were trying to solicit voters for both surveys and interviews at the same poll sites, for diversity's sake, we often targeted Asian and African Americans for interviews. This meant



that while those voters are better represented in the interview data, they did not complete the survey in large numbers. Most voters we spoke to did not complete both the survey and an interview due to time, but instead chose which method they were more comfortable with.

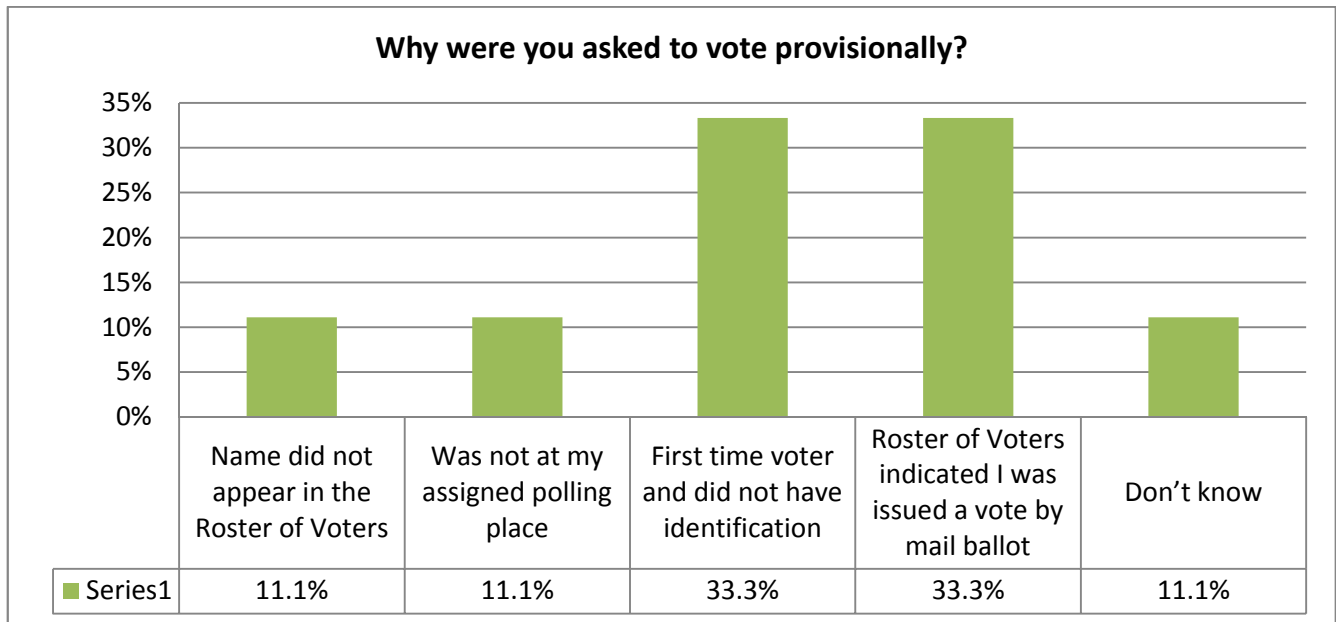
Lastly, conducting the survey at the polls meant that we only captured the ideas of people who go to the polls to vote or to drop off their vote-by-mail ballots.

By conducting a survey again in the November general election, we hope to capture a broader set of ideas and perspectives about how we can better understand the views of all types of voters. More will need to be done to understand the needs of our citizens who don't come to the polls, but this is a start. From this pilot, we will also rethink some of our strategies to ensure diverse and adequate representation by all types of voters in both the survey data and interview recordings.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Provisional Voting

Nearly 11 percent of survey participants voted provisionally. One third of provisional voters said it was their first time voting and they did not have identification. Another third of provisional voters said the roster indicated they were issued a vote-by-mail ballot. A smaller percentage of voters had to vote provisionally because they were at the wrong polling place or their name did not appear in the roster of voters. One in nine people who voted provisionally said they did not know why they could not cast a regular ballot.



We asked those voters who voted provisionally, “If you knew you would be asked to vote provisionally would that have made you less likely to come out to vote?” Fortunately, none of our respondents said yes. About 88 percent said it would not deter them from voting, while 13 percent said they weren’t sure.

We then asked, “What if I told you that once election officials confirm that you are eligible to vote, provisional ballots are counted just like regular ballots and that about 90% of all the provisional ballots cast are confirmed to be eligible and counted. Does that make you more confident about casting a provisional ballot?” About 44 percent said yes, definitely while 56 percent said “no, not really.”

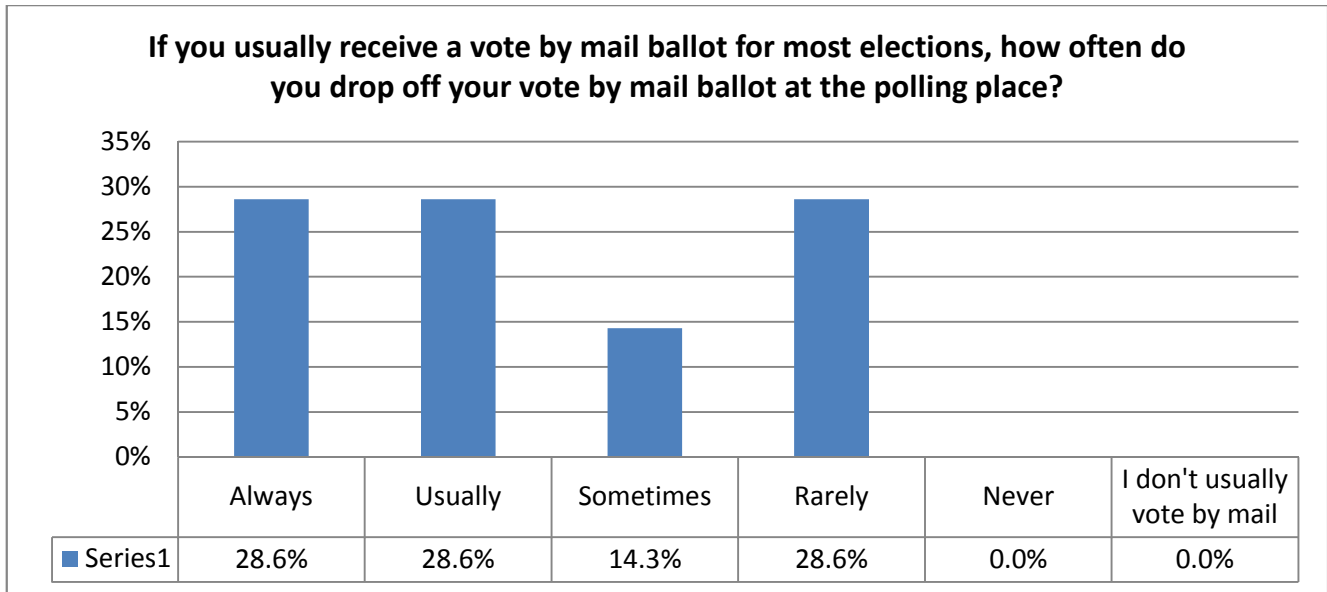
Some voters we interviewed about why they had to vote provisionally told us they made an intentional choice to come to a different polling place than the one they were assigned because it was more convenient. They didn’t mind having to vote provisionally as long as they could vote where it made the most sense for them. One voter we interviewed, for example, worked at a church that was serving as a polling place and said to us, “it makes no sense for me to vote somewhere else when I’m already here.” She was not the only one that shared that opinion with us that day. Since provisional voting can be expensive, officials should consider finding alternative procedures that would allow voters to vote a regular ballot at a polling place that is convenient to them.

None of the participants in our survey left the polling place without being able to cast some type of ballot. However, we observed that quite a few voters left the polling place without voting because they were not at their assigned polling place. Rather than vote provisionally, these voters said they were on their way to the correct polling place to vote. We were not able to capture how many of them actually voted at their polling place, or whether any ended up not voting. Because they often seemed rushed to get to the correct polling place, they choose not to be interviewed or answer any questions we would have wanted to ask like “Why did you choose to go to the correct polling place if you were already here? Do you not feel that provisional ballots are counted? Did the pollworker give you the option of voting provisionally?”

Vote By Mail

Fifty-seven percent of vote-by-mail voters surveyed regularly drop off their vote-by-mail ballot at the polls. Fourteen percent said they sometimes do while 29 percent said they rarely drop their ballot off at the polls. Because all of the voters in our survey were approached at a polling site, our findings do not reflect the percentage of all vote-by-mail voters who drop their ballot off at the polls, only how regularly those that dropped it off on June 3 tend to do so. We did not get much additional information about this from voter interviews.





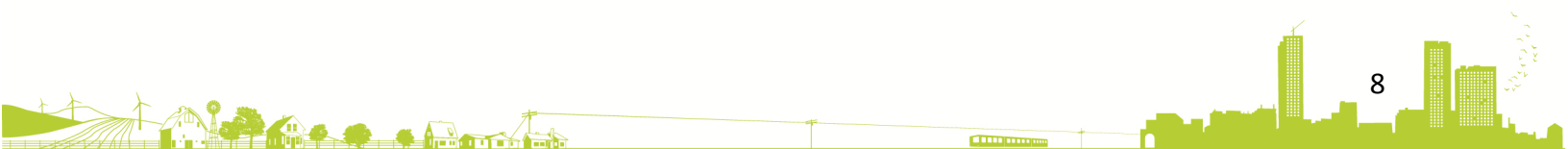
Voting Technology

Los Angeles County is notorious for its outdated voting equipment and is currently working to develop a new, more modern voting system. **About the current voting equipment, 74 percent of survey respondents said it was “very easy” to mark the ballot.** About 6 percent of voters said it was somewhat or very difficult to mark their ballot. When asked about what part of the process might be challenging for voters, 49 percent said no part of the process is challenging, 23 percent said marking the ballot with the black stylus pen was challenging, and 10 percent said inserting the ballot into the precinct ballot reader (big grey box on top of the ballot box).

The voters represented in this survey are very familiar with the voting equipment, being regular voters using equipment that has been used for many years. Our interviews with voters about the technology supported the fact that this group did not have many issues with the current technology. When we asked a pollworker what he thought about upgrading the technology and replacing the current rosters with electronic poll books, he wasn’t too confident that newer technology would be more reliable: “Right now we use paper and pencil and that works fine. Electronics break down and what if it doesn’t work?” The most surprising part of his response was the fact that he is 17 years old.

On the other hand, one voter who says she actually appreciates the “nostalgia” of the current system said that touchscreens might be more attractive to younger voters and help seniors like her mom not have to squint. Another voter who recently moved from Phoenix, Arizona where they use optical scanners said he was surprised that Los Angeles was using technology he hadn’t seen in 15 years and was happy to hear that the county was working to develop a new system that would incorporate newer technology.

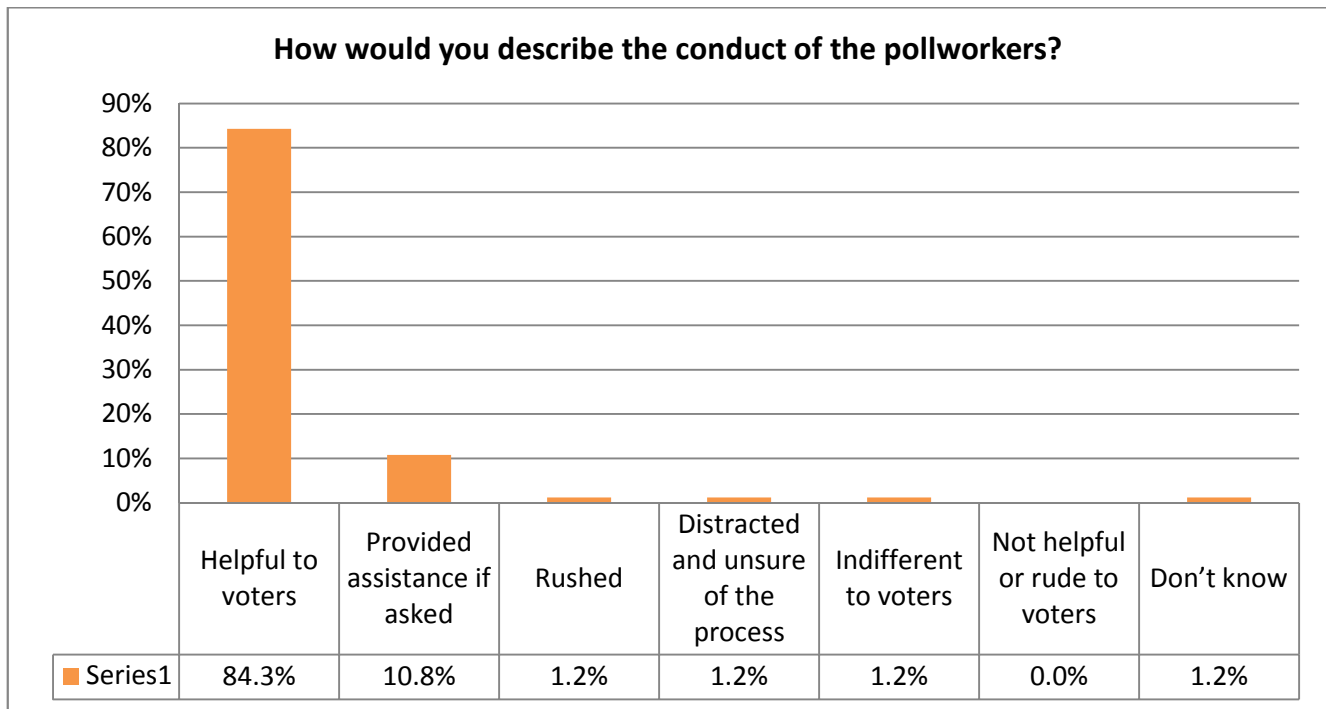
It will be important to keep these various opinions in mind as the county develops a new system. Voters will need to be taught how to use the new voting equipment once it is available and there will likely be a learning curve for the regulars who may not be as welcoming of change.



Pollworker Customer Service

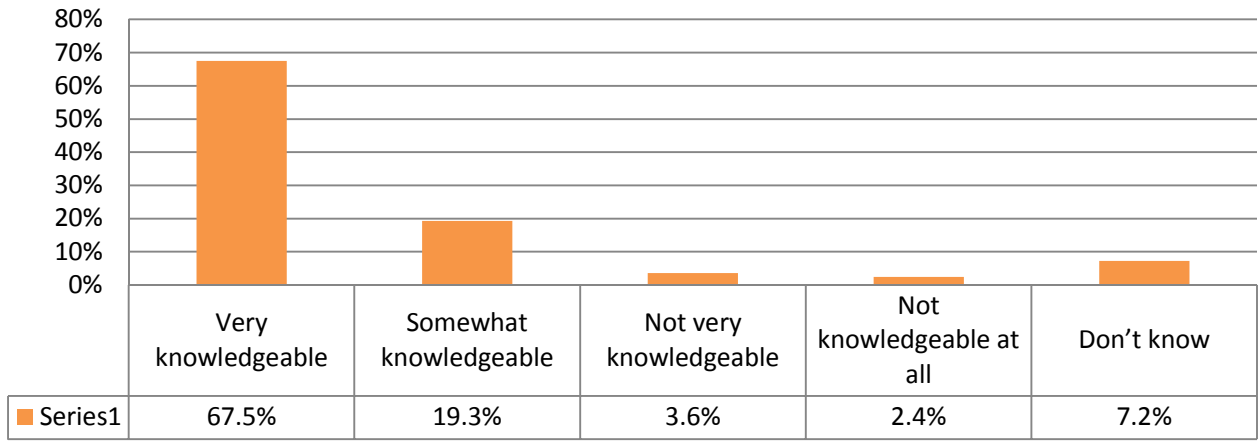
Generally, voters reported a pleasant voting experience. When we asked voters for the first word that came to mind when they thought about their voting experience today, common responses were: “pleasant,” “fast,” and “easy.” Some even shared that they thought the polling place and pollworkers were very organized.

Eighty-nine percent of voters surveyed said they were very satisfied with the service they received from pollworkers, 4 percent said they were somewhat satisfied, and 7 percent were dissatisfied. When given the choice between “helpful to voters,” “provided assistance if asked,” “rushed,” “distracted and unsure of the process,” “indifferent to voters,” “not helpful or rude,” or “don’t know,” 84 percent of voters described the conduct of the pollworkers as being helpful to voters. Few described the pollworkers as either “rushed,” “distracted,” or “indifferent to voters” (about 3 percent combined).



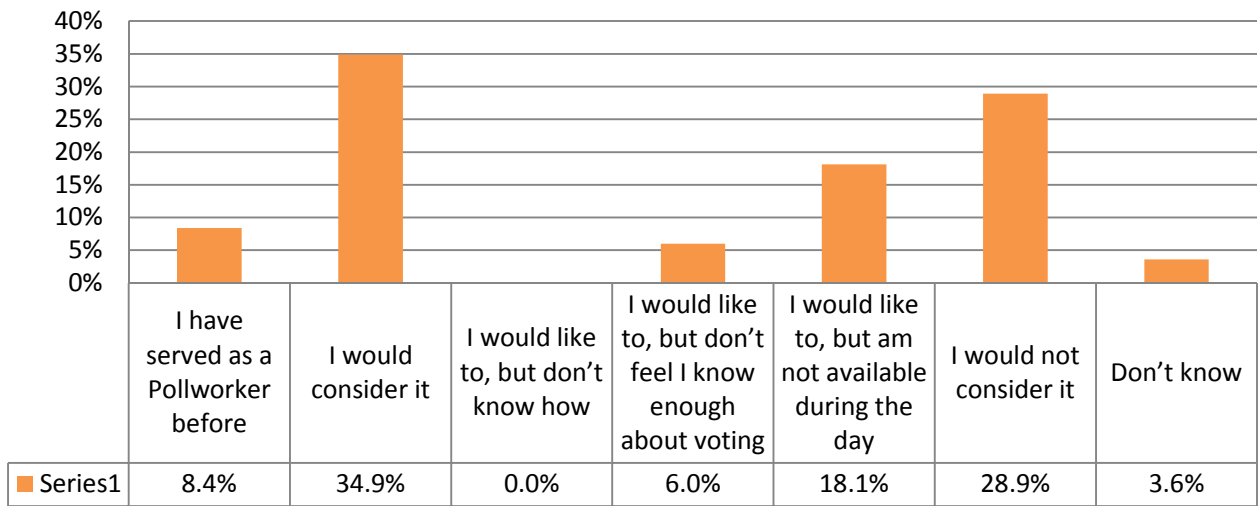
Voters also viewed the pollworkers, for the most part, as being knowledgeable. Sixty-seven percent of voters said the pollworkers were very knowledgeable about the voting process, 19 percent said they were somewhat knowledgeable, 4 percent said they were not very knowledgeable, and 2 percent said they weren't knowledgeable at all.

Now think about the Pollworkers in the polling place and about how they assisted you through the voting process. How knowledgeable would you say they appeared to be about the voting process?



Most voters surveyed would consider serving as a pollworker. Eight percent had actually served as a pollworker in the past, 35 percent said they haven't been a pollworker before but would consider serving as one, 6 percent might consider it except that they don't feel they know enough about voting, and 18 percent might consider it except they are not available during the day. Twenty-nine percent of voters surveyed would not consider serving as a pollworker.

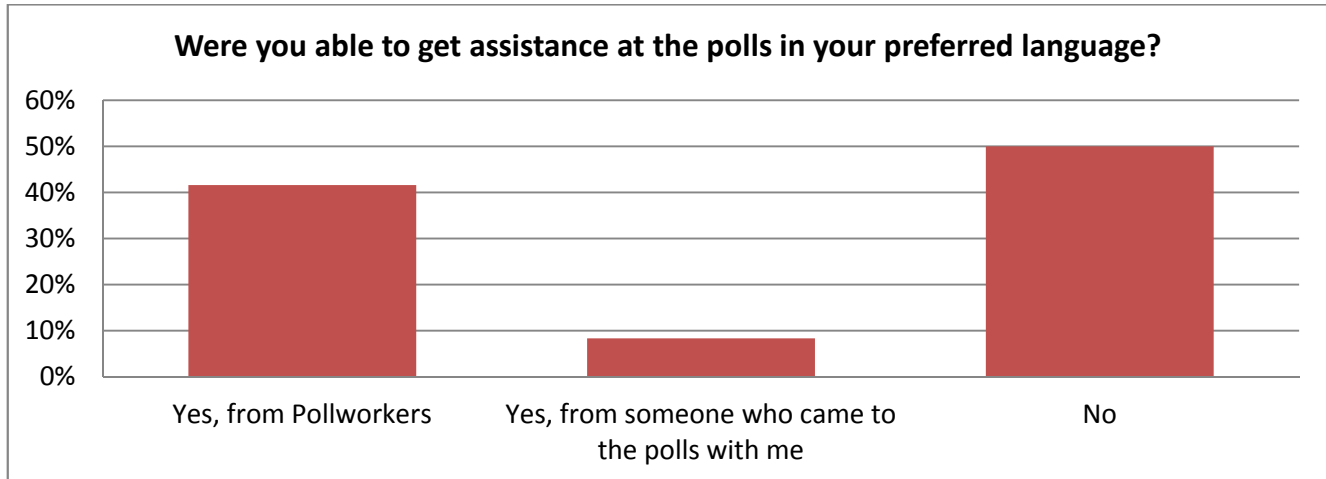
**Any registered voter can serve as a pollworker.
Would you consider serving as a pollworker?**



Language Assistance

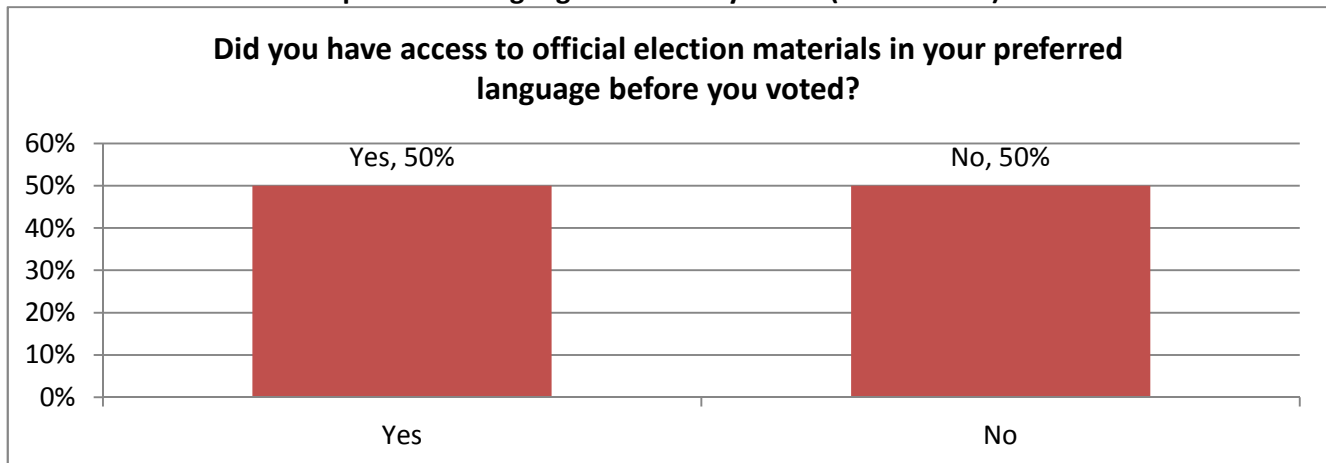
There are currently ten languages in which Los Angeles County is required to provide assistance to voters: English, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese.

Forty-three percent of voters surveyed required language assistance to vote, but only 50 percent were able to obtain assistance in their language. The other 50 percent said they were unable to get assistance in their language. Eighty-three percent of those who were able to obtain assistance received assistance from a pollworker, while 17 percent obtained assistance from someone who came to the polls with them.

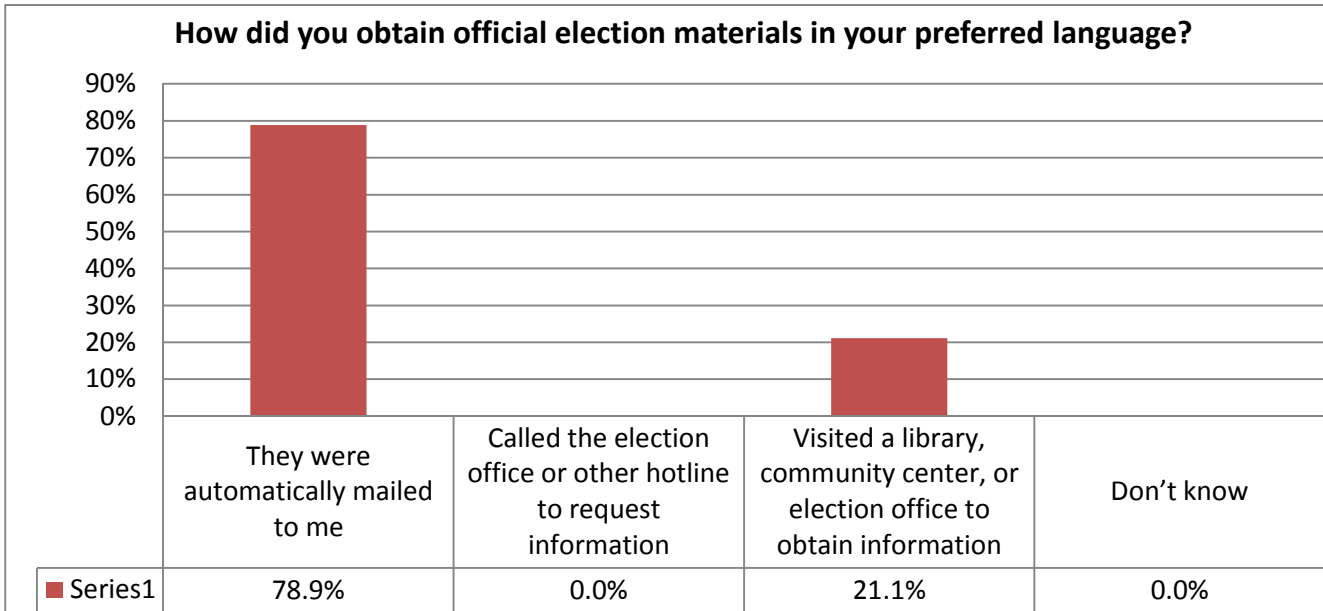


It is unclear why so many voters who needed assistance were unable to obtain it. It is possible that some needed assistance in a language not covered by law, although given the precincts we focused on, this seems unlikely. Another possibility is that the voter did not realize assistance was available in their language and did not ask for it. Perhaps bilingual pollworkers were available on location but were not easily identifiable, or that if another pollworker was asked for help, they did not know who to direct the voter to. Conceivably, bilingual pollworkers were missing from some locations. Our pilot project was not able to explore these possibilities in depth, but this is an area of concern that merits further study.

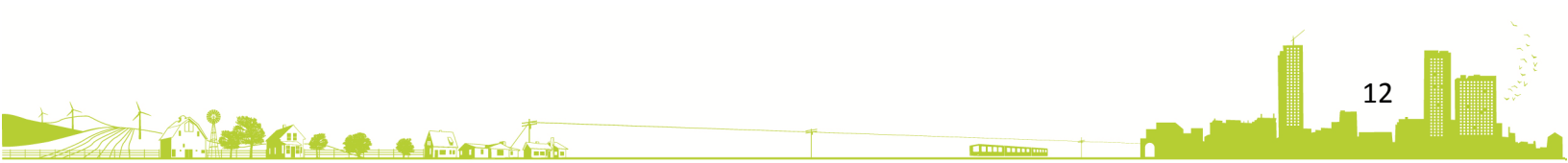
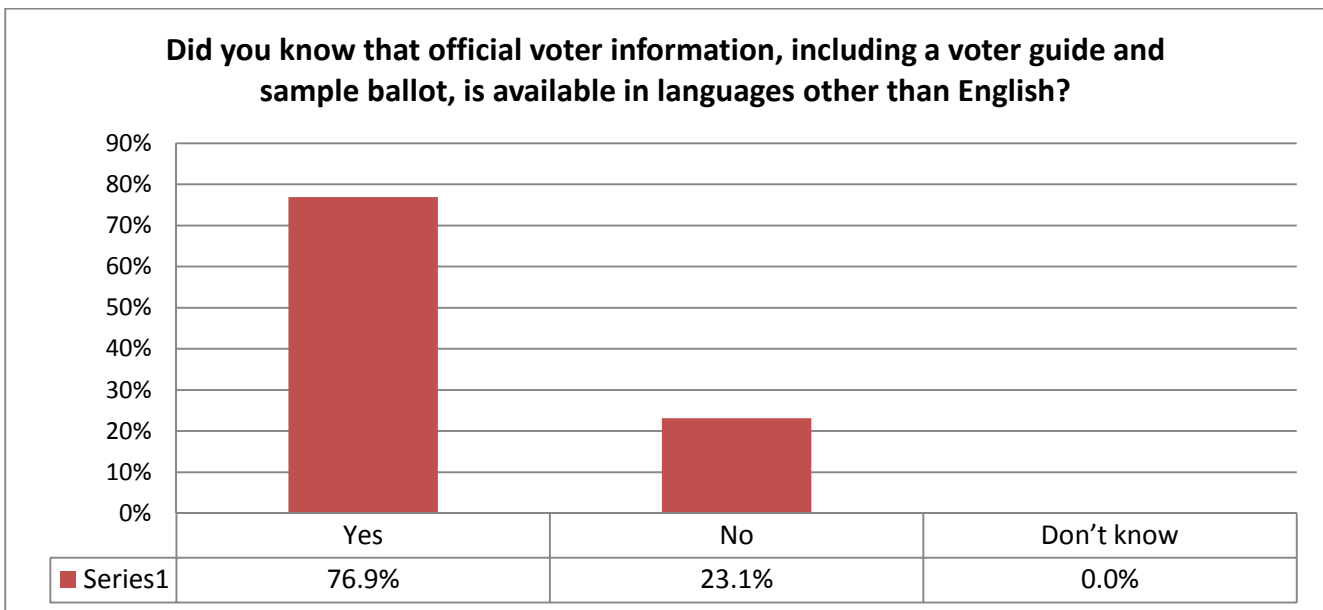
Among voters surveyed whose primary language was not English, only 50 percent had access to official election materials in their preferred language before they voted (14 out of 28).



For limited-English voters who said they did have access to official election materials in their preferred language, we asked the follow up question, “How did you obtain official election materials in your preferred language?” An overwhelming 79 percent indicated the materials were mailed directly to them, while 21 percent indicated they visited a library, community center, or election office to obtain the information in their language.



For limited-English voters who said they did not have access to official election materials in their preferred language, we asked “Did you know that official voter information, including a voter guide and sample ballot, is available in languages other than English?” About 77 percent said yes, they did know, while 23 percent said they did not know.



Currently, Los Angeles County voters are able to obtain a voter information guide and translated sample ballot in ten languages. The county election office will provide this information upon request. Usually, this information is mailed to voters in their preferred language, based on the language preference the voter indicated on his/her voter registration card. However, not all voters indicate a language preference and some registered to vote before the language preference question was added to the voter registration card. In these cases, voters can request information in available languages by calling the election office or submitting a written request for information. From this information, the county can update the voter's record to indicate their language preference and begin mailing them information in that language. Not all voters are aware of this process.

A Vietnamese man we interviewed told us that if he could be mailed his information in Vietnamese, he would understand much better. For this election, he described that both he and a coworker called the post office to ask them to mail him a voter guide in Vietnamese, and they did. This voter considered it very important to have this resource and help at the polls to navigate voting, yet because he called the post office and not the election office, he will likely continue to have this problem each election.

A Thai man we interviewed, who clearly spoke little English, was not aware that information is available in Thai. Thai is a recently-added language in Los Angeles County where he has recently begun voting. While he said he does the best he can with his limited English, he said information in Thai would really help his mom and make her better able to vote. Depending on when he registered to vote, Thai may not have even appeared as a language preference choice on his voter registration card. How we promote the availability of materials in new languages is important in reaching voters like this one.

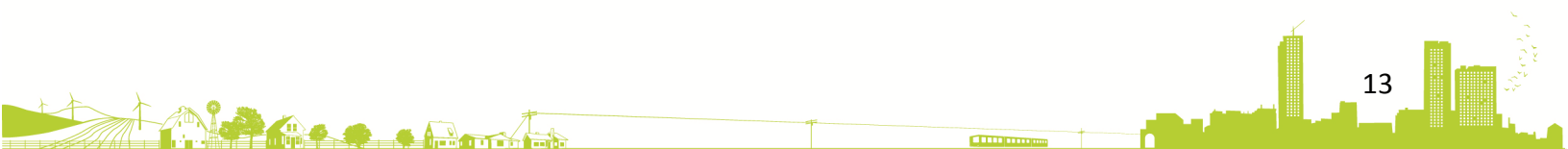
Spanish speakers we interviewed generally seemed more familiar with the availability of materials in their language compared to Asian language speakers, and were comfortable using them.

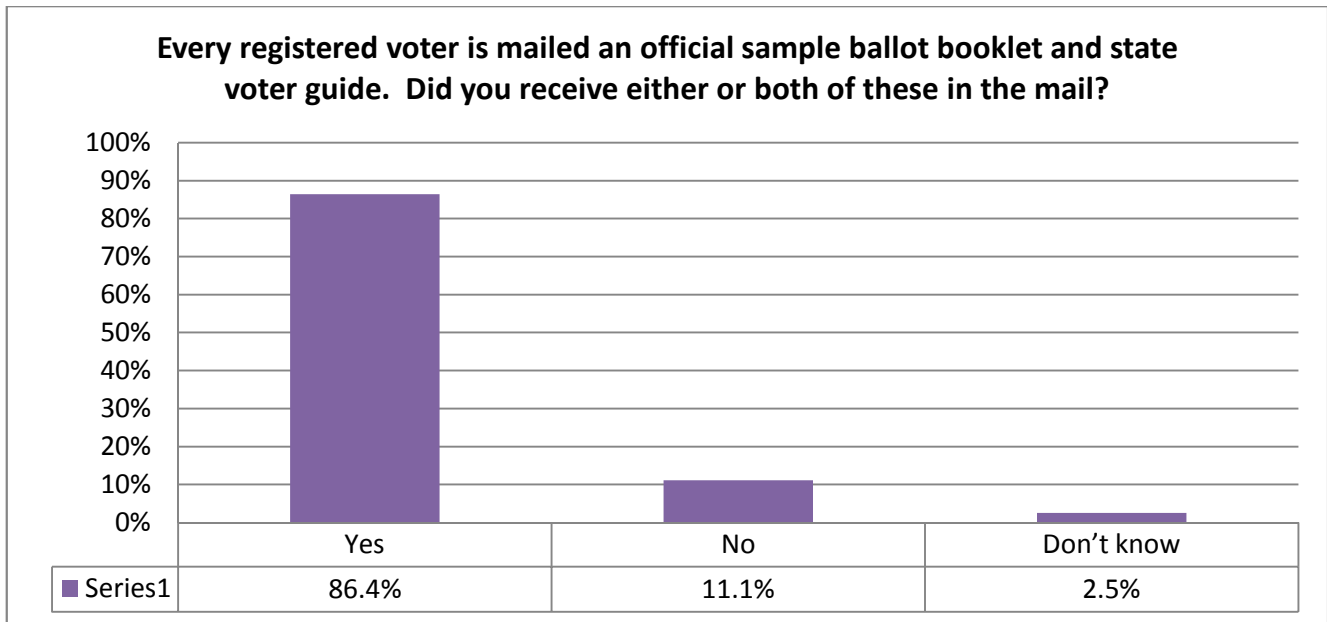
Another consideration is why, if 77 percent of the voters who said they did not have access to official election materials in their language knew that the information was available, they did not have access to it? Did they even attempt to obtain it? Further study is needed to understand voter perspectives and behaviors in this area.

Voter Information

Eleven percent of voters surveyed said they did not receive either the official sample ballot booklet or the state voter information guide in the mail. Eighty-six percent said they did receive either or both of these items in the mail and 2 percent said they don't know.

Many people we interviewed also told us they did not receive some of the information they usually get. We most frequently heard that voters felt they did not receive information about the judicial contests and information on "county issues." One man told us he received his voter guide but not his sample ballot. As a result of not receiving at least some of the information they should have received, one voter said she had to rely on information she received from political parties to help her decide how to vote. Another indicated that because he had not received information about some contests he was surprised to see them on his ballot when he came to vote. He told us he had to make an impromptu decision about who to vote for.





In addition to having access to voter information in a timely manner, there is also the issue of the usefulness of that information. One voter we interviewed said he does not ever read his voter guide. When we asked what the reason was, he said, “It seems like it was written by lawyers for the consumption of lawyers. It just gives me a headache to read it.” If the voter information was written in more plain language, he said he would be more inclined to read and use the guide.

New Voter Information Kiosk

Los Angeles County debuted a new voter information kiosk (pictured right) during the June 3 primary. A tall, three-sided, illustrated cardboard kiosk with voting information in 10 languages was placed at each polling site this election, replacing traditional handout fliers and brochures. The kiosks explain voters' rights, election laws and have instructions on how to use the voting machines. We asked voters whether they noticed the new kiosk and how useful they found it.



Most voters did not notice or have a chance to look at the new voter information kiosk. Sixty-three percent of voters surveyed said they did not notice the kiosk or have a chance to look at the information, while 27 percent said they did see it, and 10 percent didn't know or didn't remember.

Among those voters who did have a chance to look at the information kiosk, 65 percent found it helpful. Twenty-two percent of voters said it was not helpful and 13 percent had no opinion. The small number of voters who used or noticed the kiosks suggests a need to place the kiosks in more visible, hard to miss locations.

CONCLUSION

We went into this project to learn more about what is working and what is not in precincts with historically lower than average voter turnout, and while June 3 was always meant to be a pilot study, we learned a lot. For instance, the pollworkers do not seem to be contributing to the problem and a large majority of voters found them to be helpful and knowledgeable.

On the other hand, there is a continuing and increasing need to raise awareness of available language assistance and make it easier for limited-English voters to obtain such help. Considering so many survey respondents had issues and that many of Los Angeles County's lowest turnout precincts are in limited-English communities, unpacking what is happening and addressing any barriers may be the best way to increase engagement in these communities. These issues should get further attention in the November study.

Above all else, we learned that cross-sector partnerships can be mutually beneficial and enable both parties to do something that neither could do on their own. We look forward to working together again in November, and to add to the knowledge we've gained thus far.

Many of our findings will have to be tested in November to see how a larger election might change the results, and whether the opinions of less frequent voters differ. For instance, is the conduct of pollworkers any different in a busier election? Will more people notice the new voter information kiosks if they are placed in a different location during the next election? What do occasional voters think is working and not working? These are just a few of the questions that remain.

RESOURCES

To view a short video about this project, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqT2D_Nezs4

To access this report online, visit greenlining.org/LAvoter

Additional video of our interviews with voters will be released after the November study is complete. Please contact Michelle Romero with any questions at 510.926.4014 or email micheller@greenlining.org.

