



## LONG LINES

Long lines at polling places are often the order of the day on Election Day in America. In the General Election of 2004, voters in Washington D.C. waited 50 minutes or more to vote. During the same election, some Ohioans were in line 20 minutes to vote, while others waited over eight hours. In 2006 voters in Denver, Colorado, stewed for hours while waiting to cast their ballots. What causes long lines in the polling place, and how can they be avoided in the future?

Election officials across the country are concerned about this problem in the polling place, particularly during the upcoming 2008 Primary and General Elections. Because long lines are often what captures the media's attention — instead of Election Night results — jurisdictions want to resolve this issue. This white paper examines the various and often interrelated causes of long lines in Election Day polling places and offers solutions.

The causes of long lines on Election Day are many and varied. There is no one reason that voters experience long lines. In fact, the definition of a “long line” itself is subjective and dependent on the individuals and situation involved. That said, long lines are a source of frustration that may result in voters becoming disinclined to vote, even during a hotly contested presidential election. The reasons for long lines at the polling place can be divided into several categories. Long lines may be the result of any combination of these.

### Voter Registration

- Slower processing of voters at the check-in table due to voter registration database problems
- Polling place not adequately staffed for large number of registered voters in a precinct
- Longer check-in process due to first-time voters who registered by mail and must show identification
- High percentage of first-time voters who are not familiar with the process
- Additional time needed to issue provisional or affidavit ballots
- Additional steps in the process to register to vote on Election Day

### Voting Process

- Extra time needed to review and vote long ballots
- Voters unfamiliar with the ballot and contests
- Voters or polling place workers unfamiliar with voting equipment
- Voters who must wait for an accessible voting machine
- Polling places not adequately equipped for high voter turnout

### Voting Equipment

- Inadequate number of voting machines in the polling place
- Voting equipment that is perceived as difficult to use
- Voting equipment malfunctions
- Lack of backup equipment
- Computer problems at voter check-in stations
- Technology confusing to poll workers
- Technology confusing to voters

### Poll Workers

- Inadequate number of poll workers
- Inadequate level of training for poll workers
- Poor or no training documentation and reference manuals
- Late arrival or not showing, causing polls to open late

- Poll workers who are senior citizens and/or not used to working long hours
- Voters needing assistance, and confusion about providing voter assistance

### **Polling Place/Precinct**

- Changing polling place locations
- Fewer or consolidated polling places
- Voters preferring to vote on Election Day
- Problems getting into polling place to set up equipment
- Poor polling place layout
- Lack of organization
- Lack of information and maps regarding polling place locations
- Insufficient signs directing voters in polling places with multiple precincts

### **Administrative**

- Local procedures that are confusing to poll workers
- Confusing forms and paperwork
- Lack of sample ballots so voters may prepare ahead of time
- Lack of phone availability for use by poll workers at the polling place
- Problems getting through to the elections office from the polling place to resolve issues
- Running out of paper ballots
- Lack of backup paper ballots for use if electronic voting devices are unavailable
- Larger than anticipated voter turnout
- Failure to properly staff polling places at peak periods on Election Day
- Lack of or insufficient number of troubleshooters in the field
- Insufficient voter education and outreach
- Funding/budgetary issues

Explanations for long lines in the polling place can be anecdotal, even biased in some way or another, with few statistics to back them up. But even with "cold, hard facts" it is a far more complicated issue than is apparent at first glance. However, there are measures to alleviate the problem.



## **EXAMINING THE REASONS**

Much has been reported, both locally and nationally, since the November 2004 election regarding long lines at polling places. A common reason cited has been problems with the equipment, either the voting devices themselves or the computers used for voter check-in. However, there are other issues at play that have contributed to voters having to wait in long lines in order to cast their ballots. While many jurisdictions experience well-run, efficient elections, this is too often not the case.

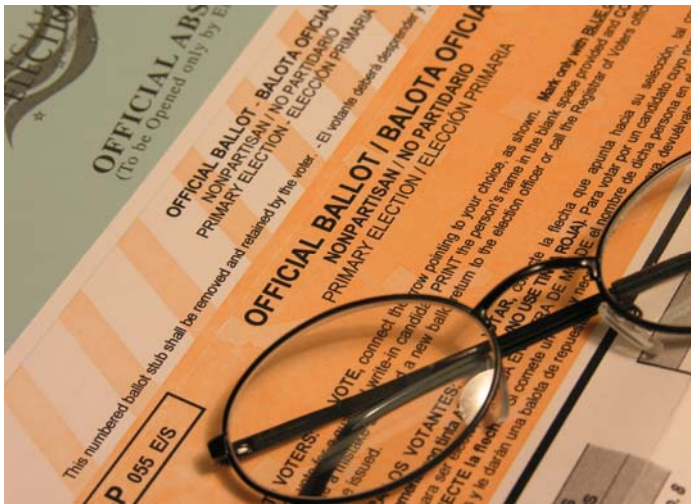
In the end, exceedingly long lines frustrate everyone — election officials, poll workers, and voters. Such problems may ultimately reduce voter confidence in the election process and create an unnecessarily tense voting environment.

### **Voter Registration**

One of the main reasons for long lines at the polling place is the slow processing of voters at the check-in table. This may be due to a number of things, including:

- Equipment difficulties when using an electronic poll book
- Incorrect or inaccurate hard-copy poll book at the polling place
- Confusion about whether or not voters are required to show a photo identification
- Time involved in issuing provisional or affidavit ballots

During the November 2006 election, vote centers in Denver, Colorado, experienced long lines caused in part by malfunctioning electronic poll books connected to the county's voter registration database (electionline.org 2006). The computers slowed or froze on several occasions when attempting to verify voter information. This caused delays and frustration among voters, some of whom left without voting and others who cast provisional ballots to avoid waiting. Similar computer problems occurred in other states as well.



Resolving voter registration list problems at the polling place can consume the energy and attention of poll workers (Alvarez 2005). Sometimes even when voter information is available, human error can lead to problems; e.g., poll workers looking in the wrong hard-copy poll book, poll books delivered to the wrong polling place, and voters not updating voter registration to reflect recent moves.

In the 2006 General Election, poll workers across the country were confused about whether voters were required to show identification in order to vote. News reports indicate there were accidental or intentional misinterpretations of state voter identification rules in at least a handful of states (electionline.org 2006).

An insufficient number of voter check-in stations causes long lines. For example, a November 2006 polling place in Morningside, Georgia, had only one electronic pollbook for voter check-in. This created a bottleneck that could not be resolved by having 12 voting booths with electronic voting devices available (electionline.org 2006).

## Voting Process

In response to public concern about the security of electronic voting equipment, some jurisdictions reverted to paper ballots for the 2006 General Election. This move to paper plus contests with many candidates or lengthy propositions often resulted in small print on the ballots. The small print was difficult for some voters to read, even with page magnifiers. Post-election surveys in New Mexico reported complaints from voters and poll workers that the new paper ballots, from their perspective, took longer to vote than the previous electronic voting technologies (Alvarez et al. 2007). Additional study suggests that paper ballots on average take longer to complete than touch screen or other electronic ballots (Alvarez 2007).

Davidson County, Tennessee, election officials reported using the same number of machines in November 2006 as in past elections, but that the large number of ballot initiatives slowed the voting process therefore forcing voters to wait (electionline.org 2006). In some parts of Texas, election officials reported long lines during the November 2007 election, even though less than five percent of registered voters went to the polls. Due to the length of time it took to read the constitutional amendments on the ballot, some voters had to wait 20 minutes or more for their fellow citizens to finish casting their votes. Election officials are concerned about what this may mean for the 2008 presidential election when the ballot will be longer and the races more widely contested (Fisher 2007).

High voter turnout can be an obvious cause of long lines at the polling place. This situation may be in combination with too few electronic voting devices or booths for marking paper ballots, long ballots, and/or running out of paper ballots on Election Day. Alameda County, California, reported voters waiting in line due to a record number of students and residents turning out to vote in the 2004 presidential election (Luna & Soohoo 2004). St. Louis County, Missouri, reported that long lines during the November 2006 election were caused by increased voter turnout and a lengthy ballot. In the 2006 General Election, a number of polling places across the country made the news when additional paper ballots had to be rushed to precincts by police officers (notably in Boston, Massachusetts; Bernalillo County, New Mexico; and Brown County, South Dakota) or county employees (notably in Wisconsin) (electionline.org 2006).

## Voting Equipment

In the 2004 General Election, most voters used the same voting machines they had used in the 2000 elections, including punch cards and lever voting systems. However, by 2006 many jurisdictions had purchased new voting equipment to replace the older voting technology and to comply with the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) requirements for accessibility. An estimated one-third of all polling places in the country used electronic voting machines for the first time in the 2006 General Election. Nationwide, the number of counties using direct recording electronic (DRE) voting machines quadrupled, from 309 counties in 2000 to 1,142 counties in 2006 (electionline.org 2006). Unfamiliarity with the new equipment, causing voters to take longer than previously to cast their ballots, may have contributed to delays in polling places. Additionally, there may have been some perception that some of the new equipment was difficult for voters to use.



While electronic voting is generally believed to be quicker than voting paper ballots on Election Day (Alvarez 2007), it is imperative that adequate voting stations be provided to accommodate voter turnout. Not having enough voting equipment (the ratio of devices to registered voters being too low) and inadequate or lack of backup equipment are common problems for election officials.

On November 18, 2004, *USA Today* reported an extreme example of long lines in Gambier, Ohio, where only two electronic voting machines served 1,170 voters. The polling place had to stay open until 4:00 a.m. to accommodate the line of voters (Drinkard 2004).

After the November 2006 election, officials in Douglas County, Colorado, reported that an insufficient number of voting machines and a long ballot kept some voters in line until after 1:00 a.m. (Able 2006). Similarly, voters interviewed in Sagamon County, Illinois, during the 2006 General Election said that while machines worked well, there were not enough of them, causing voters to wait in line to vote (electionline.org 2006).

## Poll Workers

Issues faced in recent elections (particularly the 2004 General Election) have largely been attributed to technology or procedures — the voting machines, voter registration databases, rules governing voter identification, or access to provisional ballots. However, whether elections run smoothly or disastrously is also a function of the performance of the poll workers who are charged with administering the vote. Technical or procedural problems are compounded by the fact that poll workers today are being asked to do more than ever before. Many of the changes required by HAVA added to the load on poll workers' shoulders.

Election officials understand that properly trained poll workers make Election Day run more smoothly and more efficiently. However, the challenges for officials are ensuring that poll workers attend training and that the training is effective. The efficiency of a polling place is diminished when one or more poll workers have insufficient or no training to perform their duties.

Most poll workers are temporary employees or volunteers who are asked to work long hours — often a 12-to-15-hour day. One Washington state poll worker noted, "Most poll workers are seniors, and few are accustomed to even an eight-hour workday. When polls close, a portion of workers can't compute the arithmetic necessary to complete paperwork. Others feel too pooped to care" (Zaino 2006).

Too few poll workers and late or no-show poll workers contribute to polling place problems. Low pay and the lack of penalties for no-shows are factors in this issue as well. Additionally, there is often a lack of properly trained backup workers.

## Polling Place/Precinct

Often, polling place locations change from election to election. Securing enough buildings for their precinct

polling places is always a challenge for election administrators. Changing polling locations also creates a challenge for voters who go to the wrong location and then have to find the correct polling place with less time than they planned to have available to vote.

Because polling places are usually located in public buildings, inadequate and confusing polling place layouts can cause problems. Two or even three separate precincts may be combined in a location that is barely large enough to accommodate one precinct. Voters often have to trace a complicated path, figuring out which precinct to vote in, where the polling place is located in a building, and then going from authentication to voting booth to a ballot scanner to cast their ballots (Alvarez et al. 2007).

In addition, space constraints at some polling places make it impossible to add more voting equipment — even if additional machines are available.



### **Administrative**

Ask any election official, and he or she will acknowledge that despite doing all you can to prepare for Election Day, things happen that just can't be anticipated. Despite the hard work and dedication involved in planning and conducting elections, problems do occur that often cause congestion in polling places.

Several of the problems that caused lines of voters during the 2004 General Election were alleviated by the implementation of HAVA requirements. However, responding to HAVA may have added new problems that must be solved; e.g., long-standing polling places that can no longer be used because of their inaccessibility to persons with disabilities and older facilities that cannot handle the electrical load of the new equipment.

## **CORRECTING THE PROBLEM**

Just as there is no single reason for long lines in the polling place, there is no single way to correct the problem. Each jurisdiction must examine its own issues and determine what can be done with the time, personnel, other resources, and budget available.

### **Voter Registration**

Voter registration is a central component of the election management process in the United States. It is an important foundation for how elections are administered.

Where hard-copy poll books are used, one fairly obvious solution is to provide additional copies in the polling place. However, the information in the books must be accurate, complete, and up to date to be useful. And election officials must ensure that there are an appropriate number of check-in tables, with poll workers to staff them. These measures are particularly important in precincts with a large number of registered voters, where voter turnout is expected to be high, or in jurisdictions that allow same-day voter registration.

In vote centers or consolidated polling places, electronic poll books that connect directly to the jurisdiction's voter registration database are virtually the only way to efficiently check in voters. Voter registration databases are complex and dynamic systems. As such, one or more aspects of the technology may fail at some point. For this reason, the voter registration databases should be thoroughly tested in an environment that closely resembles the high load and network congestion of Election Day. In addition, it is important that poll workers be properly trained on the use of these databases. Election officials must also develop backup processes for voter verification so that elections can proceed, even in the event of a system failure. When appropriate, these processes should operate in tandem with provisional balloting and other measures designed to protect the voters' right to vote. In turn, this will help reduce long lines in the polling place.

### **Voting Process**

Despite the rise in early voting and by-mail voting, most Americans still go to a precinct-polling place to cast their ballot on Election Day (Alvarez 2005).

Election officials must acknowledge this phenomenon and plan accordingly. A number of the problems that slow down the voting process can be solved with voter education. By using voter outreach programs, jurisdictions can educate voters about ballot layout, contests on the ballot (including lengthy measures), and the voting equipment itself. Many voter outreach programs can be implemented with very little funding, but these efforts do take a good deal of organization, time, work, and a dedicated volunteer labor force.

With paper-based voting systems, the layout of the entire ballot can be one of the most important decisions made by election officials. Decisions made to pack a long ballot onto a single sheet of paper for cost considerations might lead to a higher risk of voter mistakes. Therefore, technical aspects of ballot layout must be examined, including type faces, design for differentiating various contests, and numbers of columns per page (Alvarez 2002). Ballots for electronic voting systems are not exempt from this scrutiny. Electronic ballots must also be easy to read and understand, and must provide a logical flow from contest-to-contest.



### **Voting Equipment**

Having the appropriate number of voting machines for the number of voters registered in a precinct is an important element in managing the voting process. The commonly used ratio is one electronic voting device for every 185 to 250 registered voters. Consideration must also be made for long ballots (either electronic or paper), such as is likely in the 2008 presidential election. The additional ballot review associated with a voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) will add to the time each voter spends in the voting booth. In an effort to improve traffic flow, each jurisdiction must appropriately assess its need for additional equipment.

Additional voting equipment can alleviate long lines. For example, in the November 2006 election, students at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, waited only a few minutes to vote on one of eight new voting machines on campus. This was compared to the hours-long waits to cast ballots on one of two machines at the same polling place during the General Election of 2004 (electionline.org 2006).

An Associated Press article (Hastings 2006) reported that in the November 2006 election, one-third of American voters faced ballot machines they'd never used before. With more than 80 percent of the nation's voters now casting ballots on some type of electronic system, correcting equipment issues will continue to be a priority for election officials. Backup equipment is a must. Proper testing and verification of equipment prior to polling place delivery, and the availability of adequate numbers of well-trained field support staff are critical to preventing equipment malfunctions or responding quickly to them.

Here again, voter education is important. Demonstration voting units and sample ballots should be made available in the weeks before an election so that voters can familiarize themselves with the devices and the contests. Voters that come to the polls knowing how they will vote, or at least understanding the issues, will be able to cast their ballots more quickly — resulting in shorter lines.

### **Poll Workers**

According to a briefing published on electionline.org (electionline.org 2007), America's poll workers number two million per federal election, nearly double the number of people who work for America's largest private employer. Their workday usually exceeds 12 hours, and they receive minimum wage or only slightly higher in most of the country. Considering the importance of elections in this country, and with all the new equipment and procedures in place, a well-staffed polling place with capable poll workers is key to successful, accurate elections.

Poll worker training is critical to successful elections. With the ever-changing legal environment and onset of new regulations such as provisional voting, voter identification, and electronic equipment, poll worker training is more vital than ever before to the conduct of successful elections. And while poll worker training varies greatly across the country, most jurisdictions do offer classes and require attendance

of at least the lead poll workers. There are several factors facing election officials regarding poll worker training:

- Quality of the training
- Clarity of the documentation and manuals
- Whether poll workers are actually absorbing and retaining what is taught
- Whether the training reflects what actually happens at the polls

Some jurisdictions have turned to poll worker surveys to provide feedback on training and to address any shortcomings. Others have turned to vendors to assist with ongoing specialized training and documentation. Some states are developing Web-based training programs. They are working in conjunction with local organizations and universities to create training programs using a set curriculum and documentation.

According to the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), the average age of a U.S. poll worker is 72. While that age itself is not problematic, when combined with the long days and more technical nature of today's voting systems, the polling place can be challenging for senior-citizen poll workers. The EAC encourages jurisdictions to look to high schools, colleges, community groups, local government employees, and corporations as a source for poll workers. In addition, to recruit an adequate number of poll workers, state election laws need to be examined for the possibility of increasing compensation and reducing the number of hours (Zaino 2006). Voting jurisdictions should consider allowing poll workers to work short shifts and split shifts. This type of flexibility may help attract new workers, including those with full-time employment and those with young children.

Many jurisdictions across the country are also looking at consolidated polling at "Super Precincts" and/or vote centers as means of requiring fewer poll workers, or at least concentrating poll workers in fewer locations where they might work in shifts under more technically trained staff members.

### **Polling Place/Precinct**

A critical task to successful elections is selecting appropriate polling places and informing voters of those locations. Election officials often need to expend greater effort in evaluating the desirability of combining precincts into a single voting location (Alvarez et al. 2007). They need to consider the

number of registered voters in the precincts to be combined, as well as the square footage of the polling place location.

In addition, ensuring that polling places are well laid out and are intuitive to voters will minimize problems and speed up the process for voters and poll workers. Ideally, there should be a single designated entrance and exit to the polling place. There should also be adequate signs directing voters, especially in multi-precinct polling places or vote centers, or if the polling location has changed. Election officials also need to consider contacting the local media to notify voters if polling places have changed locations. And, of course, the information must be available on the jurisdiction's website. Additional methods to inform voters include stuffers in utility bills or hang-tags left on front doors.



Consolidated polling places, "super precincts", or vote centers may provide opportunities to focus equipment and manpower in fewer locations on Election Day. However, these centers must be convenient to voters, and they must be administered in such a way that voter check-in is a smooth process, or they will not solve the long line problem.

Super precincts and vote centers may put increased demand on the jurisdiction's electronic infrastructure. With electronic poll books becoming more popular, each polling place needs an adequate number of computers for checking in voters. And back at the election office, the voter registration system and the server on which it resides must be robust enough to allow continuous multiple requests for information.

An example of a city-wide, consolidated polling place running smoothly is Great Falls, Montana. Previously, voting had been conducted at Cascade County Courthouse Annex, but was moved to a much larger exhibition hall at the fairgrounds for the November 2007 elections. Same-day registration,

which occurred for the first time in 2006, resulted in long lines of people in cramped quarters at the elections office, prompting concerns about fire codes and voters having to wait outside in the cold. The decision to consolidate the polling places was made largely to put Cascade County election officials and the 180 poll workers in the same location, making problem solving easier on Election Day. As an added benefit, the larger space provided the city's 35,000 registered voters with adequate parking and plenty of voting booths. Election officials estimate that for the November 2007 municipal election, the average voter waited in line for less than 5 minutes, and that it only took about 6 minutes for a voter to be checked in, vote, and exit the facility. Voter registration was performed via a wireless computer connection, which election officials plan to change to a faster direct connection for the 2008 General Election. (Puckett November 4, 2007; Sickels 2007)

### **Administrative**

Encouraging voters to cast their ballot absentee/by-mail or during the early voting period are options that could help reduce lines on Election Day. However, because some voters mistakenly believe that their vote "counts more" if it is cast on Election Day, the public must be educated on the conveniences and security of by-mail and early voting in-person. In order for early voting and by-mail solutions to be a part of the solution, some states' voting regulations must also be updated to allow early voting in-person and no-excuses by-mail voting.

No matter when they choose to cast their ballots, voters must be educated on what to expect in the polling place. One option for providing voter outreach is the League of Women Voters' successful "5 Things You Need to Know on Election Day" public awareness campaign. The simple steps outlined in this handout encourage voters to be prepared when they come to the polling place (League of Women Voters 2006).

More might be done to educate voters about how to vote on a paper ballot, especially in those jurisdictions that have moved from an electronic voting system to a paper voting system. Providing sample ballot materials to voters before the election might increase voter familiarity with the Election Day ballot and give voters a convenient reference to bring with them to the polling place.

Voter education tools should also be provided at the polling place, ideally including demonstration equipment to help educate voters who may be unfamiliar with the voting system. Poll workers should be trained to provide appropriate assistance when needed.

At the polling place, setting up equipment early enough to deal with potential problems, and having well-trained poll workers who can properly operate and troubleshoot equipment will result in a smoother voting process. Election officials should ensure that poll workers are equipped with the proper tools for handling equipment issues, including dedicated phone lines in the election office to enable quick responses to calls for assistance or backup equipment. Super precincts and vote centers should also be considered as options that provide both voter convenience and administrative efficiency.

Having an appropriate number of poll workers in each polling place is important. Depending on a jurisdiction's individual needs, at least four poll workers are needed to operate a polling place to accommodate 1250 registered voters.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

As Americans prepare for the 2008 Primary and General Elections, delays and long lines in the polling place are a real concern. The issue is complicated, having numerous causes and varied solutions.

Educating the public about the ballot and the voting process is an important first step in addressing the problem of long lines at the polling place. Proper training for poll workers is imperative, not only to reduce the number of problems that occur at the polls, but to inspire more voter confidence in the election process. Election officials must evaluate their local procedures and develop ways to streamline those processes, resulting in more efficient and trouble-free elections. In addition, supplemental voting equipment must be purchased before Election Day, allowing sufficient time for proper testing and training.

Although the problem of long lines is complex, there are solutions that can be applied to ensure that the only news reported about Election Day is the kind of news elections officials want — news reporting the timely delivery of election results.

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