Election Readiness: Tabletop Exercise

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Abstract

This paper explores previous tabletop exercises and election research conducted on Election Day issues such as line length, accessibility accommodations, and reliability of internet and voting machines. Previous articles discuss the importance of voter turnout and the impact election committees have on it. To address these challenges of Election Day planning, a tabletop exercise was developed for the Tippecanoe County Election Committee in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. This tabletop exercise explores multiple phases of Election Day as well as examples paths designers can use for the phases.

Keywords: election, election tabletop, tabletop exercise

Introduction

Presidential and congressional elections are one of the most vital aspects of the democratic voting process. The aim of this study is to conduct a tabletop exercise that will be used to help the election officials and voters understand the voting process better to increase voter turnout. The federal government's interest in both elections and their process is to ensure voters and their ballots are confidential and that the results are fair. Staples of this democratic voting process include confidentiality, integrity, and availability to all citizens of legal age and citizenship status. The authors have created these table-top exercises for Tippecanoe County due to the large population of university students. There are a plethora of students arriving on campus each year with different backgrounds and ethnicities which can make voting a troublesome and confusing process. This is due to the fact that voting procedures tend to vary from state to state and even county to county.

With the number of voters in college-based towns, there needs to be some way to regulate and review the voter process each year to determine how it can be improved. A current board staff member and his team from the Tippecanoe County Board of Elections and Registration aided and managed 250 staff members at over 20 different locations in Tippecanoe County during the past 2020 Presidential Election. These table-top exercises will be able to aid those workers into being as knowledgeable as possible come election day so the voting process can continue with ease.

Literature Review

The 2020 Presidential Election had a record number turnout, with over 159 million Americans voting (The 2020 election by the number). With this high turnout, there were claims of long waits throughout the country with a BBC News report of lines as long as nine to eleven hours to vote (*US election 2020: World reaction to long queues of voters in US*, 2020). Research found that voters of lower socio-economic groups spent longer times at the polling booth due to poll worker efficiency as well as there are times during Election day where the polls are busier than other times (Markovits and Spencer, 2010). Research by Stein et al. validates this claim, stating that wait time and line length correlate with the time of day (2020). This research is insightful as it can help Election Committees (EC)'s understand when there could be more voters and plan accordingly. However, while an EC may try to plan accordingly, executing a new plan on Election Day may not be effective.

Another metric of measuring election success is voter turnout. There is evidence that reducing operating hours reduces voter turnout (Garmann, 2016). Polling location also has to do with voter turnout according to Brady and McNulty (2011). Changing a polling location within the Los Angeles County precinct reduced turnout by 1.85%. While the changed location itself was not a deterrent to voting, changes in voters transportation methods were a deterrent. Another hindrance to voter turnout is being inaccessible for the disabled. Schur, Ameri, and Adya controlled for differences in voters with and without disabilities and found that those with disabilities had a 22% higher chance to have difficulty voting than those without a disability (2017). However, there is limited research about how these topics related to voter turnout have been modeled within the past four years.

Research also suggests that poll worker age plays a part of the errors made at a polling location. According to Burden et al., voting locations with older poll workers and more poll workers have less incidents or problems on voting day (2016). Their research also finds that absentee ballots cause an increase of incidents on Election Day.

The layout of a voting center can also impact voter turnout, voting error, and prospected wait times. If a potential voter sees a line that is out the door, despite it only being a five minute wait, this could cause anxiety around voting. This line could therefore impact their choice of choosing to stay and wait to vote and increase the voter turnout numbers. Bernardo, Macht, and Lather simulated the 2020 Presidential Primary in a Los Angeles County voting center (2020) with different voting layouts to understand what layout would be the most beneficial to wait times. Separating only provisional ballot processing and moving the check-in station and separating the provisional ballot processing resulted in a reduction in wait times. It is recommended that for Tippecanoe county elections the ratio of voting machines to check-in stations be at least a 2:1 ratio during general elections to avoid a bottleneck caused by voters being checked in faster than they can cast their ballot. It should be noted that this recommended ratio is only applicable during early voting on general elections as it both takes longer to check voters in, due to the additional steps of creating a provisional ballot, as well as cast their ballot, as the much larger size of the ballot results in voters spending a longer time choosing all the candidates (Bailey et al. 2020). These models provide a starting point of how to model different layouts to improve a voting center, yet do not take into consideration the complexities such as older buildings, human error, and training that could also impact these times.

Table Top Exercise

Our table top exercise is intended to validate previous research in the form of a tabletop exercise. These include having a resource allocation plan for busier times, having more staff at voting locations in lower socio-economic areas, having a wide range of voting hours and locations. When creating our table top exercise, we kept these ideas in mind in order to improve efficiency and timeliness for voters at each polling location. Below discusses our idea for the tabletop exercise, what topics we will cover, and what resources would be needed.

Exercise Design

This tabletop exercise was developed by a design committee that included representatives from Purdue University as well as community partners. The tabletop exercise scenario, storyboards, and messages were developed to address the objectives listed below. This specific tabletop exercise focuses on a Presidential Election Election Day and the phases include Early Voting, Election Day, the time of vote counting (when the polls close), and the short period (less than one week) following.

Objectives

The objectives of this tabletop exercise include…

1. Test the current Election Day flow of voters in regards to wait time and line length;
2. Test the internal and external communication vectors during the entirety of Election Day (6AM - 6PM EST) to ensure availability;
3. Demonstrate the ability of the Tippecanoe County Election Committee to execute an Election Day with wait times no longer than 20 minutes at any location;
4. Test how Purdue University and Ivy Tech students and staff can provide expertise relating to technology, communication, and modeling as an Election Day asset.

Setting

Tippecanoe County is a county in the Central West portion of Indiana with a population of approximately 199,000. Tippecanoe County is home to Purdue University, Indiana's land-grant university. Purdue University has a student population of over 45,000 as of Fall 2021. The main campus of Purdue University is located in West Lafayette, Indiana, in the center of Tippecanoe County. The University has around 8,000 international students. Ivy Tech Community College is also located in Tippecanoe County, in Lafayette, Indiana. Ivy Tech has approximately 8000 students.

Participants

The tabletop exercise participants were individuals who were identified as having a strong skill set for helping with election readiness. These include Purdue and Ivy Tech students, professors, and safety officials who research and have background in these topics. Representatives from Tippecanoe County are critical to this tabletop exercise such as the Election Officials, West Lafayette, Lafayette, and Tippecanoe County Emergency Management, and the Tippecanoe County ADA And Title VI Coordinator. Technological staff are also invited to participate including the Voting Machine Technicians and Tippecanoe County Information Technology Staff.

Tabletop Exercise Execution

In this tabletop exercise there will be 4 modules as previously discussed; Early Voting, Election Day, the time of vote counting (when the polls close), and the short period (less than one week) following. Within each module there will be data drops where new information and scenarios are given to the players. The players will also be given scripts or tasks to complete within each module. Specific scenario issues within each module are listed in Appendix B.

- After the tabletop exercise, three documents will be given to the Tippecanoe County Election Committee…
    - The first being an after action report, which will include general observations and recommendations from those observing and the moderator.
    - The second being the corrective action report that the Tippecanoe County Clerk and moderator develop together that address the areas of assessment, gaps, and corrective actions to remedy gaps.

○   The final document being a work plan that includes specific actions, timelines, responsible departments or people for these actions, a way of tracking for accountability, and monitoring steps. This will be done in partnership with the design committee and the Tippecanoe County Clerk.

Design Scenarios

Phases

Early Voting

Early voting will take place in the few weeks leading up to election day. Those who wish to skip the lines on election day or need a provisional ballot will be able to cast their votes at an earlier date. What issues might occur if someone claims they are registered to vote in a given county and want to turn in their absentee ballot in order to vote in person? Another issue might be someone who is unsure if they are registered to vote by the deadline. How might this be addressed during early voting and how can election officials ensure an individual is registered in the proper time frame so they are able to vote in upcoming elections.

Election Day

On election day officials for a given county might experience any number of hiccups or issues. A common issue might be an individual having a change in name or address recently and having difficulties showing proper identification in order to vote. It is important for poll workers, volunteers, and election officials to be aware of how to handle this issue. Another common issue is the voter might be registered in the wrong county, what would be the proper procedure for how to address this incident. The poll workers may encounter issues with connectivity with the registration station. How might election officials ensure that there is no downtime during election day to prolong the wait time or even deter others from voting if that happens.

Time of Vote Counting

During the time where the votes are being counted at each election site some concerns about provisional ballots may arise and whether or not they should be counted or not. There might also become issues with the software or the paper ballots that were filled out. This might cause

longer wait times for election results as the ballots would need to be counted by hand multiple times in order to ensure accuracy.

1 Week After Election Day

After election day while votes are still being counted in some states and counties election officials will want to gather to discuss how the voter process went at each of the locations in the designated districts. Topics in need of discussion are wait times, early voting, election day, registration issues, voter foot traffic, provisional ballot process, absentee ballot process, and voter card return. Each of these topics being discussed will aid in the process for improving election day efficiency and voter satisfaction. The idea is for the voter process as a whole to be quick and easy and with a constant review after each election it will be easier to address any issues that may have arisen during the election season.

Paths

The following paths are topics that will be addressed in each phase of the tabletop exercise. Each path below includes an example scenario.

Upcoming Election

In previous Presidential Elections in Tippecanoe County, there have been bottleneck issues with voters during the early voting period. Election officials communicated it would be beneficial for the upcoming election to include adding another poll worker to stand near the exit to assist voters in returning their cards and exiting through the proper doors, however on previous Election Days, there are no extra poll workers to spare during this time. The wait times usually increase to about 20 minutes between the times of 11am and 1pm at any given location. Following the lunch rush, there was an alert made to the main election officials downtown about requesting back up volunteers to be scheduled during these hours to ensure properly trained staff is available.

Election Readiness

The upcoming election in Tippecanoe County has been experiencing issues with election readiness in its voters. It seems a strong number of eligible voters have issues with knowledge, understanding, and transportation about when, where, and how they can vote. This was brought to light from a survey conducted in previous years about likelihood to vote in the next election. This had become an issue due to voting locations being near a college town where many out of

state, yet eligible citizens do not know how to vote in a different county. This takes place during every election "season". Following the years past, more resources have been provided to reach out to these voters on how they can get registered in this county online so they can vote. Another alert was made to students who may live out of state, on how to request a mail in ballot so they can vote early in their county.

Training the Staff

The upcoming election in Tippecanoe County has been experiencing issues with under trained staff. It appears that the volunteers do not receive sufficient enough instruction for understanding the general voting process. This has come to light due to volunteers struggling to answer voter's questions during both early voting and election day. This sometimes causes voters to be unable to cast their ballots due to registration errors or filling out the ballots incorrectly. A training going over how to answer these questions and how the voting process works has now become a mandatory event. This will aid volunteers who actually want to be there to be able to assist voters who may need help. They will also be required to pass a general "quiz" at the end of training to prove they were paying attention and can answer general guidelines with regards to the voting process.

Election Day Issues

Election Day has caused many locations to have too many voters to cast their ballots in one location in the county. The main voting office for the county communicated that this has caused unnecessary wait times as well as some locations having more foot traffic than others. This causes moderate issues with both voter satisfaction as well as the not enough staff to get through all the voters in a timely manner. This takes place on election day for those voters who did not participate in early voting. This has been an issue in past elections according to the county, it is suggested that a secondary nearby location be available for voters if they are looking for shorter wait times come election day.
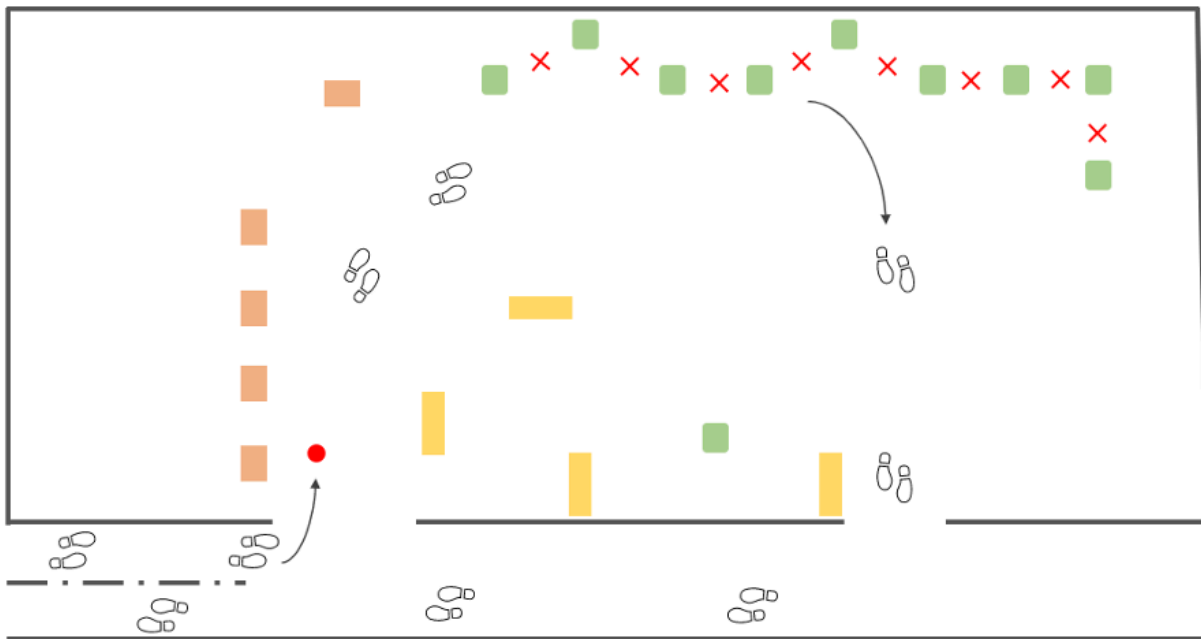
Equipment Usage

Tippecanoe County has experienced issues with some of the equipment being used for the voter registration process. Many volunteers are over 50 according to the county's volunteer records. This means they incur more troubles with using the new technology to check whether a voter is accurately registered to vote in this county or not. This can bring to light the issue of
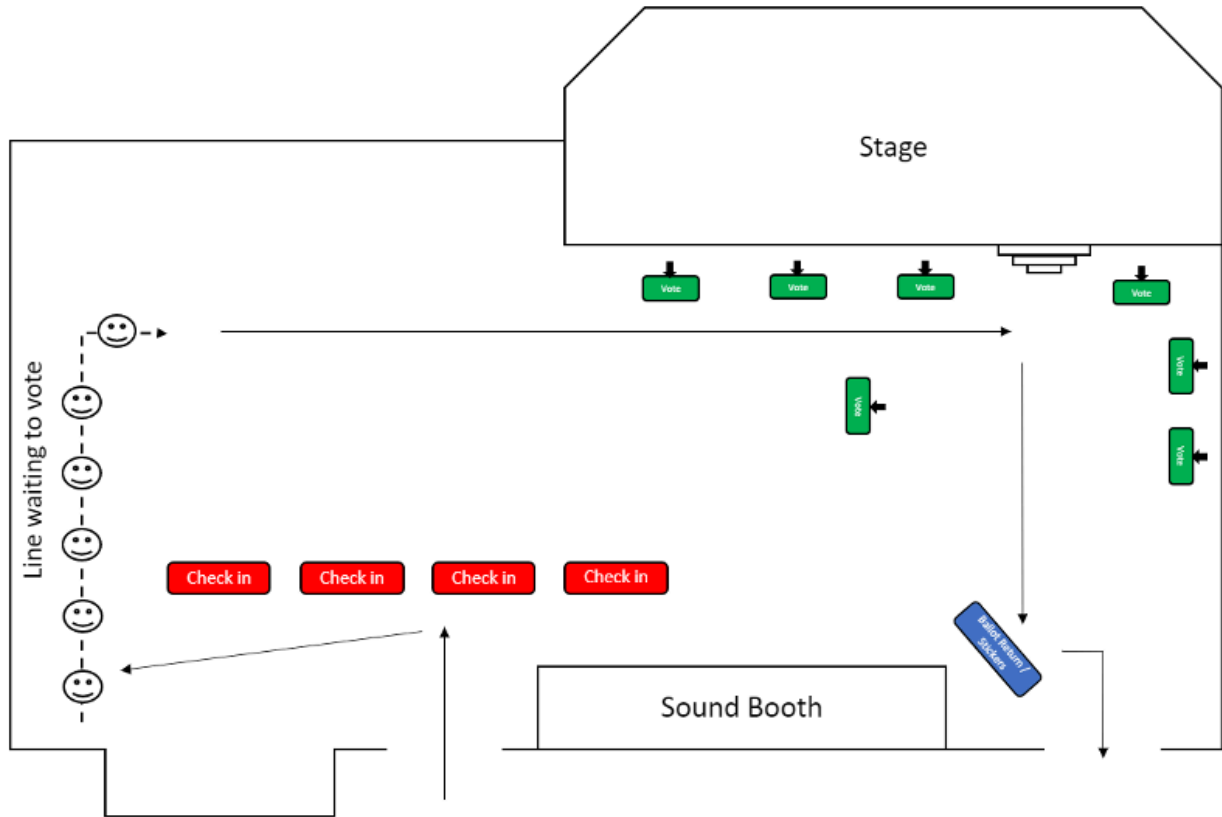
volunteer poll workers' knowledge of how to use the technology is insufficient. This takes place during early voting and election day. It can cause the voter process to be slowed allowing less voters per hour to get through the line. This has been addressed by better preparing the poll workers by giving them opportunities to practice and interact with the appropriate software prior to their volunteer shifts. This will give them the ability to gain familiarity with how it works in a hands on experience to prevent issues in upcoming elections in the future.

Previous Layouts

Below are layouts from previously conducted research to show the voter process in different voting locations around Tippecanoe County. The path goes from waiting in line to the orange registration tables where the poll workers will verify a voter's registration in Tippecanoe County. From there, the voter will proceed to the green voting booths with the red "X"'s to maintain social distancing. After the voter has finished casting their ballot, they will return their voter cards to one of the yellow tables and proceed to the exit. Poll workers will be stationed at each of the orange blocks in order to assist voters with any questions, comments, or concerns they may have during the voting process.
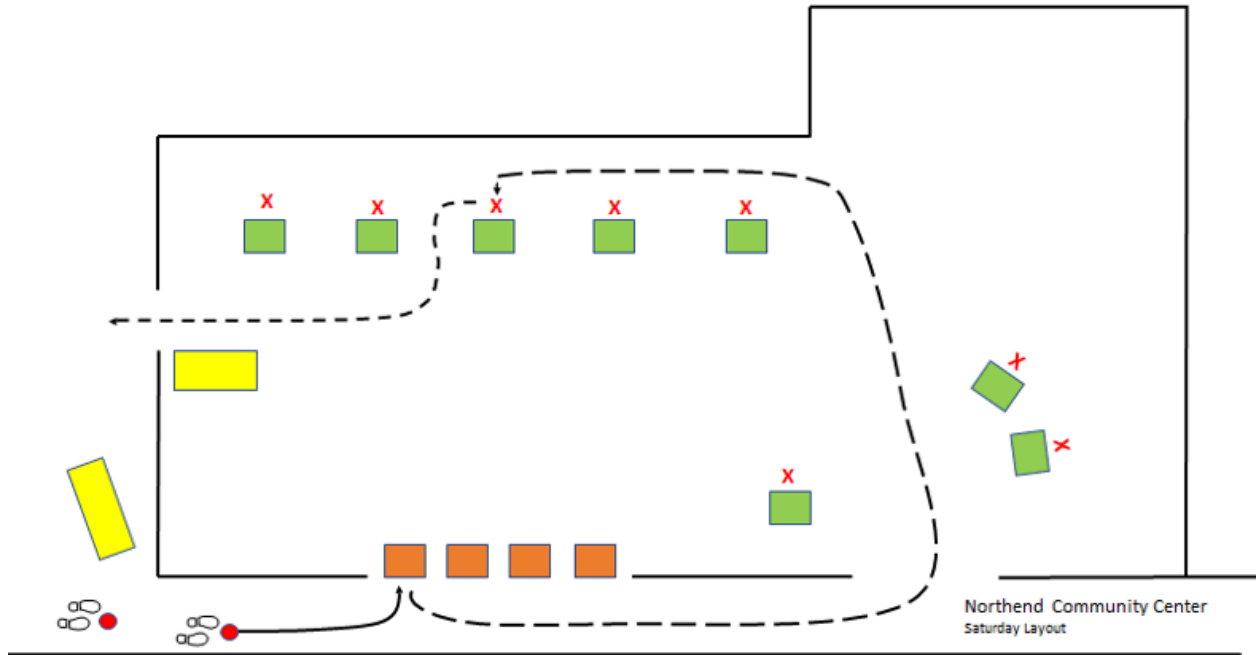

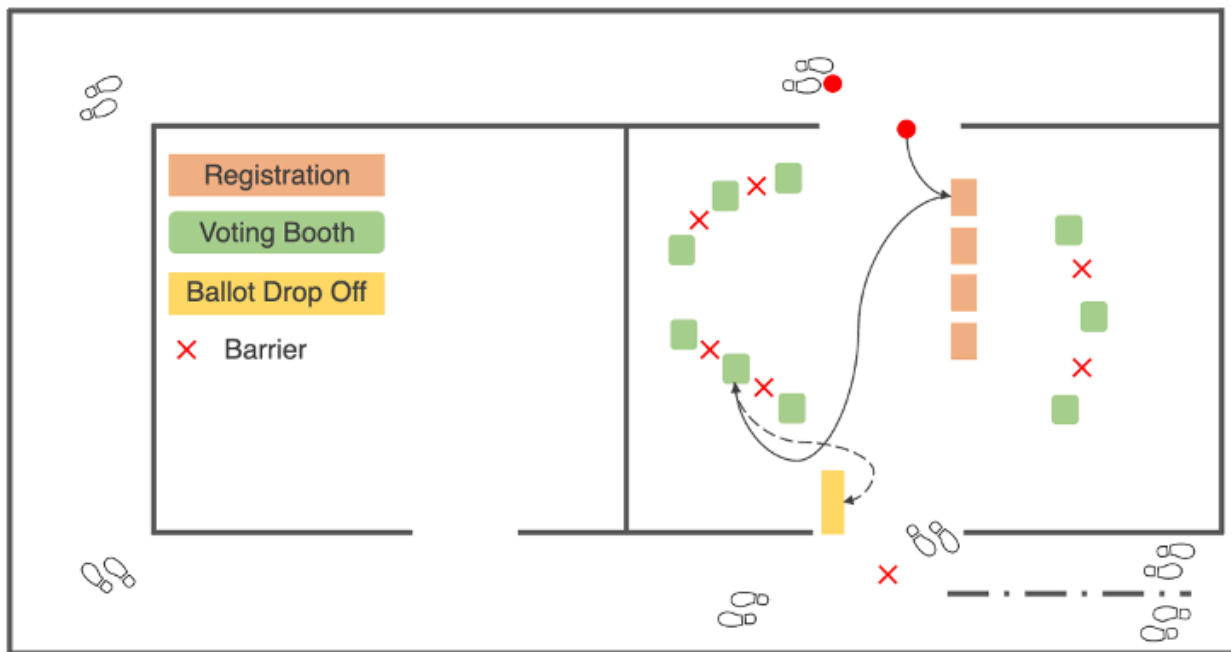*November 3rd Election Day Voting Layout – Ivy Tech Lafayette, IN*

River City Community Center Early Voting Layout

October 31ˢᵗ Northend Community Center

October 31ˢᵗ & November 1ˢᵗ Tippecanoe County Office Building

At the end of the tabletop exercise, we would debrief the participants in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current plan in order to design the work plan.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be made based on the conclusions from previous research on how to appropriately approach a successful election day from a logistical standpoint. One of the most important aspects is that all voters have access to current knowledge regarding the voting process itself.

A big issue that many voting locations regularly encounter is lack of signage. This causes the voter traffic flow to be more congested and bottleneck which can lead to longer wait times. It is imperative that election and poll workers are able to identify the most efficient flow of voter foot traffic for each of the given areas. Signage can be crucial in relaying current information about the layout of an election site. Appropriate signage could be located outside of the voting location, at the building's entrance, throughout the waiting lines, at the registration table and near the exit and voter card return.

Poll workers should also be understanding of the training they receive in the weeks and days leading up to the election. They need to be aware of how to answer and address any questions that may arise during election day whether that be from other poll workers or the voters. It is important that all poll workers attend the on-site training for the location that they will be working at and that the layout of the voter process is identical at each location. This will prevent confusion and clear up any ambiguity that may arise on election day. The training modules and tabletop exercises that will be completed by all poll workers on election day is crucial in that each worker is capable of performing their duties during the voting hours. The training received can also give knowledge and familiarity with the software and hardware that will be used in the voting process such as the registration check in booth and the voting machines, this will ideally help reduce any errors come election day.

Another recommendation would be to track election site status to see trends between wait times at certain times of the day and voter traffic throughout early voting and election day at a given location. It is also imperative to have any emergency contacts and communication in the event of an emergency occurring, whether that is with a voter, poll worker, site itself, technical issues, or voting machines.

After each election is over the election officials should gather and develop an improvement plan matrix. They will be able to set goals, make action plans, and benchmarks for future elections. These officials will be able to gather information from each election site and discuss what went well and what areas could use some improvement. It can be used to determine what can be done to make the process easier or more understandable, especially for the older voting crowd who may not be familiar with how to obtain the online resources for how to vote ahead of time.

Conclusion

Regarding the previous research to create the table-top exercise above has aimed at understanding how to improve the voter process and poll worker understanding of procedures during an election. Recommendations were made on how to approach a successful election day and any improvements that could be made during the voting process. Issues were identified in both the voting locations layout and the poll worker knowledge and understanding of procedures. This table-top exercise can be used to help election officials better prepare their poll workers for upcoming elections in the future by addressing any issues and difficulties encountered in previous election processes.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1

Roles of Participants

Role Name	Role Responsibility
Voters	

Poll worker	
Senior poll worker	
IT Staff	
Downtown Election Commission Staff	

Appendix B

Table 2 - Specific Scenario Issues

Equipment Issues	Voter Issues	Wait Time	Staffing Issues
Internet outages	Already voted	Long wait times	Poll workers not showing up
Voting machines	Provisional ballots	Inaccurate wait times on online portal	Interpersonal issues
Electronic phonebook	Unregistered		Lack of enough IT / Election Machine Technical Experts
Phone issues	Voter fraud		