As a nation, we expend enormous resources identifying, targeting, and delivering voters to the polls. Improving the voter experience at the polls merits an effort as well.

All too often voting—the most basic act of civic engagement—is fraught with challenges. Lines are unwieldy, signs are confusing, check-in processes are inefficient, poll workers are undertrained, voting machines are insufficient, and technology is poorly utilized. When voting becomes problematic and frustrating, political participation suffers.

The PollWatch team set out to uncover and alleviate the challenges that voters face on Election Day.

On November 6, 2012, PollWatch solicited citizen feedback about their interactions at polling sites around New York City.

Our findings are not exhaustive. We drew our conclusions from a small sample, and our recommendations require further testing.

However, our analysis indicates that quick, inexpensive, common-sense solutions could go a long way toward improving the voter experience.

**NYC VOTER EXPERIENCE REPORT // Briefing Memo**

Findings and Design Recommendations from PollWatch data.

**VOICES FROM THE POLLS**

*Excerpts from 2012 PollWatch Reports*

“The lines were confusing and long. The poll workers were confused and had no idea what was going on. One of the scanners broke, and they continued trying to scan ballots into it anyway...It was a mess.”

12:51 pm, 95 Lenox Ave, New York, NY

“There was no one instructing you what to do when you arrive...People are confused and frustrated in here. Someone needs to think about the overall experience of the voter from the moment they walk in... it feels like there’s no one managing this site.”

12:37 pm, E 5th St, New York, NY

“1 functioning ballot scanner, 3 not working. Hundreds in line. I left without having my ballot scanned after 90 minutes.”

11:04 am, 421 East 88th Street, New York, NY

“Three hour wait, poll workers telling people different things, broken scanners, oh, and a FIGHT”

11:45 pm, 900 St Marks Ave, Brooklyn, NY
Our analysis points to one very clear challenge:

NYC poll sites are not currently resourced or designed for actual voter turnout patterns.

The data indicates that voter turnout is greater in the mornings and evenings yet, polling site resources appear to be calculated for a uniform hourly turnout rate, exacerbating three key poll site challenges.

The chart above shows the percentage of PollWatch reports received by hour on Election Day. We assume the reporting pattern approximates the voting pattern.

If we assume, as the Board of Elections appears to do¹, that voter turnout occurs approximately consistently over the hours poll sites are open, poll sites would serve the same number of voters every hour² (as indicated above by the green line).

However, we can see that there are periods of peak demand (morning and around lunch, when the bars exceed the average). Poll sites struggle to accommodate the influx of voters at these times.

1. An Analysis of the Number of Voters per Voting Machine, NYC Board of Elections, Aug 2006
2. We do not know the uniform hourly voter turnout rate that the Board’s resource allocations cover. The calculation may, for example, cover a larger percentage per hour than 6.7%. However, our reports of wait times clearly suggest that current resource allocations are insufficient for peak periods.

PollWatch reports shed light on common poll site experiences.

We received 306 different reports, often with multiple problems in each. Of the 345 reported items identified, most indicated that the voting process was satisfactory. Of those identifying problems, the largest category by far was long lines (103).

In examining the text of the reports, we uncovered that people most often had issues with the poll workers (21), ballot scanners (18) and layout (17).
Confusing Site Layout

“Massive chaos here...Very long snaking lines overlapping each other and in and out traffic flow. Took over 2 hours to vote. Many potential voters walking out.”

~ 10:46 am, 35th ave, Astoria, NY

Variations in voter turnout throughout the day strain the capacity of polling sites and create confusion, given their current design.

In particular:

1. **Informal and chaotic lines** form due to a **lack of spatial planning for peak periods** of demand.
2. **Signage** indicating the voting process is often **not easily visible from the entrances or between steps** and rarely clearly worded. For example:
   - The voter instruction poster—which is the sole explanation of the voting process—suffers from an **overabundance of data** and is **not well structured** for easy comprehension.

A well-planned layout **could better accommodate peak periods**:

**VISUAL CUES**

Adopt color-coded **district tables** corresponding to **colored lines** on the floor, which could be as inexpensive as low-tack painters’ tape.

**LINE LAYOUT**

Predetermine and clearly mark lines and critical paths. Create **auxiliary waiting lines** if services or technology should back up.

**CLEAR SIGNAGE**

Use clear language and make visual connections between stages of the process, keeping in mind **voters’ sight lines** along the way.

Signage should communicate ways to expedite the process before voters move into the information desk waiting line.
### Slow Check-In

“I got in line around 8:45 and left around 10:15am... the system was very disorganized with multiple lines; the workers were chatting with each other, not giving updates and the line was moving so very slowly. I saw at least 10 people including myself leave because of the wait...I will try to get back there before 9pm.”

~ 10:49 am, 652 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY

Voter check-in and ballot pick up locations are similarly ill-equipped to accommodate variations in voter turnout, which leads to further delays.

This is a result of:

1. An insufficient number of poll workers during peak periods of demand.
2. Inadequate training for poll workers that is limited to multiple choice paper exams.
3. Inefficient, cumbersome processes, such as poorly configured voter sign-in books that inhibit fast searching.

Common sense, quick fixes could easily make voter check-in and ballot pick up a more seamless process during peak periods of demand. For example:

1. **Staff polling sites more flexibly**, with an emphasis on deploying greater numbers of poll workers for shorter shifts during peak periods.
2. **Provide more specialized training** to poll workers, including simulated trials.
3. **Redesign the voter sign-in book for faster searches** by adding letter tabs and making it easier to divide the check-in process between multiple poll workers.
Technology Misfires

“Just before 7 am, the machines were down and instructions given were incorrect. At first, they handed out provisional ballots without voting cards, and then changed it to the normal ballots to be scanned in later hopefully. The chaos and misinformation, coupled with long lines led to frustration and probably people walked out.”

~ 9:55 am, 91 Claremont Avenue, New York, NY

Inevitable technology misfires further intensify delays during periods of peak demand.

In particular:

1. **Ballot scanners break down**, on average, more than once per polling site and take an average of 45 minutes to repair.
2. **Poll workers do not consistently use backup ballot boxes**, which do not appear as a natural part of the voting process.
3. **The limited promotion of existing tools**, such as NYC’s Poll Finder app, represents a missed opportunity for greater efficiency. If widely used, this tool, for example, could help alleviate crowding at poll site entrances, by allowing voters to bypass the information table.

While technology breakdowns may be unavoidable, their consequences do not have to be. For example:

1. **Ensure enough ballot scanning machines are available** for peak periods of demand. Assuming some will fail, include built-in redundancy.
2. **Redesign the backup ballot box** to create a trusted, official auxiliary mode of submitting ballots when machines are down.
3. **Promote the Poll Finder app** as a valuable source for election day information.
4. **Share real-time data feeds** so that civic-minded coders can build innovative election day tools to further improve the voter experience.
About the Report

This Voter Experience Report is based on data collected through the PollWatch project.

PollWatch is a non-partisan way to crowdsource and report problems at the polls on election day. When a voter uses PollWatch to report a problem, it is mapped on a public website and reported to the relevant election administration. The data collected is open and accessible through an API.

The project’s goal is to facilitate solving those problems as quickly as possible, so that any voter who wants to vote is able to do so easily.

PollWatch is a joint project of Common Cause/NY, Reboot, and Websava and won first prize at the Civic Engagement Hackathon sponsored by the Personal Democracy Forum in June, 2012.

About Reboot

Reboot is working toward a 21st century social contract.

Reboot is a social impact firm dedicated to inclusive development and accountable governance. We help governments, foundations, and international organizations achieve their missions. We think of this as working toward a 21st century social contract.

The foundation of governing legitimacy and collective prosperity, a social contract is inclusive by definition. While the ability to access information, organize, and input has reshaped the scope of inclusivity in governance, few institutions have kept pace with these changes. Our social contract is due for renegotiation.

Reboot is working at the forefront of these transitions. We help our clients explore the origins of complex issues, design contextually appropriate interventions, bring these ideas to reality, and evaluate the results along the way. We approach the task with a set of underlying principles that cut across each engagement: immersion, collaboration, and iteration.

The possibilities for inclusive development and accountable governance—for a 21st century social contract—are growing. From supporting good governance in Nigeria to human development in Nicaragua to civic innovation in the United States and beyond, we are working to realize them.

Connect with us at www.reboot.org