



The Weirdest Election “Night” Ever: A pre-election worksheet for journalists on the ground

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The American public may not see winners announced quickly in this year’s election, due to delays from mail-in balloting driven by the coronavirus pandemic. If races are close, it could take a week or more to count votes and declare winners.

Reporters will need to explain how voting works in advance, and set expectations clearly for the possibility of delayed results. During the wait, partisans might try to shape the social media narrative through misleading readings of voting returns.

Poynter advises journalists covering the election to reach out to sources in advance to understand the nuts and bolts of voting for the areas they cover. This worksheet is intended as an aid to that process. While not encompassing every reporting avenue, we hope it is a good start to preparing for the overall election season.

Election basics

Which agency runs elections in your area? What decisions does your local agency have the power to make? What processes are required statewide?

When something goes wrong during voting, it helps to know ahead of time if that is an issue under the control of the local elections office or the state.

For example, find out if your precincts/early voting centers will have new equipment for any stage of the voting/tabulation process, and if it was a choice by the local office to purchase that equipment or if it was a statewide mandate. If anything goes wrong and the finger pointing starts, information about the elections office budget may be helpful, too.

Gather the following materials before Election Day:

- media guide from the local elections office (if they have one);
- list of all early voting/Election Day sites;
- list of registered poll watchers on behalf of the campaigns;
- voter file as of book closing;
- list of the names of everyone on the canvassing board (the board that determines if ballots are valid) and the judges assigned to the board. Track down any cell phones or emails and send them a short email introducing yourself and say that you just want to confirm they are on the canvassing board. This serves as a test and will give you an idea of who will respond to you once a canvassing board starts convening.
- The local elections' office budget request for the 2020 election and documentation showing the approved amount. (This is likely through a city or county commission and should be publicly available online.)

Note for reporters and photographers: Print out these documents and create a folder for yourself in your car for quick reference.

What are the names and phone numbers of officials at your local agency?

Ask them ahead of time the best way to reach them about voting and election misinformation and procedure. Will they be tweeting updates? Will they add you to an email list? Do they post information on their homepage in lieu of tweets or email?

Ask the officials about the types of misinformation they have heard so far this year about voting and elections in your area. What are the biggest myths/misunderstandings the public has about how the votes are tabulated? Their answers can be the basis for pre-election stories.

Also ask if it is possible to tour in advance an office where votes are tabulated. If you go on a tour, ask to see the main pieces of election equipment used by a voter and the elections workers on Election Day. Ask the specific name of the manufacturer and model and how long it has been in use. Ask officials to explain the process of how they get the votes from all the precincts to the center where they tabulate the totals.

Who are your community's independent election watchers?

Reach out to the local Democratic and Republican party organizations, as well as the League of Women Voters, ahead of time. Tell them you are covering voting/election issues and to please let you know if they hear about misinformation. Ask them if they have contacted local election officials to express any concerns related to any problems related to voting or access to the ballot. Explain that this is different from attacks between candidates — you want to know if they hear that a certain precinct is going to be eliminated, or that the elections office has a shortage of Election Day poll workers, or had to re-print certain ballots due to errors. Ask them for the names of the attorneys they have lined up for Election Day(s). Have those lawyers' cell phones/emails in your cell phone ready to go.

Early voting

When does early voting start in your area?

Ask for data from your local elections office showing the most popular early voting sites earlier this year, in 2018 and 2016. Use that data to help you decide which early voting sites to go to live to report/photograph. Find out if there are any new sites — or if any sites from the past four years have been eliminated — and why. Ask if your elections office posts and updates wait times at each early voting site.

Will ballot drop boxes be used?

Where are drop boxes in your county or city, and how many are new for this November election? Can you also drop ballots off at election offices? When an elections official tells you that a drop box is “secure,” ask what that means — does that mean there is a 24-7 security camera? Does it mean that the box is outside of an early voting site, and there is a security officer somewhere at that site? Is it literally a box that resembles a mailbox, or is it a slot in a wall? (Go take a photo ahead of time, so if drop boxes become a subject of a lawsuit or story you know exactly what they look like.) What does your state law say about who can collect ballots for others?

Mail-in voting

What are the specific processes for voting by mail?

What is the deadline for voters to request a mailed ballot, how do they request a ballot, and what is the deadline for it to be received by your office, according to state law? Check your local elections office website to see if they are publicly posting the number of mail-in ballot requests, the number of ballots returned, etc. In your county, where is the mail processed and who can you speak to at your local mail processing facility?

Find out how your election supervisors handle ballot signature “cures” (that is, when a voter is given an opportunity to fix a ballot if something is wrong with it, such as a missing signature), and what the deadline is for making fixes.

Election Day voting

How many precincts will be open in your area? How does this compare with previous years?

Claims of voter suppression often revolve around the number of precincts and how many voters are expected at each precinct. The pandemic has upended the usual expectations. ([More limited in-person voting places do not necessarily translate into voter suppression if early voting and mail-in opportunities are increased](#). But expect a debate over the drawbacks of limited Election Day voting sites)

How many election workers are filling which specific jobs are anticipated for Election Day?

Shortages of Election Day workers have been reported around the country. Historically, many workers have been older, and thus at higher risk of a coronavirus infection.

What does the law say in your state about voters in line when the polls close?

Keep in mind that judges sometimes intervene to keep packed polling places open.

Election night coverage

What is your election official's plan to provide media access to watch results come in and the canvassing board?

Will reporters be in the same room as the election officials or is there a separate media room? What credentials do you need to get in?

Find out the supervisor's processes for documenting the different kinds of invalidated mail ballots. (There are forms, for instance, that are filled out when supervisor's employees pick up mail ballots from the USPS after the 7 p.m. Election Day deadline.)

Misinformation resources and human error

Who are the experts in your local area and state who know how voting and elections work?

This could be a former elections supervisor, an attorney for a statewide association of elections supervisors, a political science professor who studies voting and elections, a local attorney who goes every year to watch the canvassing board on election night, etc.

Reminder: Human error does not equal fraud. Human error can happen at any stage of the voting/election process. It can happen on the part of an elections employee, a contractor or a voter. Errors and election mismanagement are stories, but don't assume that they are evidence of fraud committed to help/hurt a particular candidate.

See [PolitiFact's elections topic](#) for more examples of misinformation.

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