

Ballots or Bedlam

by Cristian Salazar

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NEW YORK — Much will be at stake when New Yorkers go to the polls tomorrow, but perhaps nothing more so than the basic right to vote.

As of yesterday, less than 72 hours before Election Day, tens of thousands of voters were confusingly [assigned new poll sites](#) after Hurricane Sandy knocked out power to or damaged the usual spots where they cast their ballots.

Some of those 60 or so unusable sites have also been consolidated into about 26, meaning crowds of voters will likely show up at overtaxed schools or private sites to pick their candidates,

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which could lead to long waits at the polls.

Some voters will also be making their picks outside in tents, while others may need to be bused from devastated neighborhoods and shelters to make their voices heard.

And for many people who turn out to vote in this critical election — if they are not dealing with flooded or destroyed homes, displacement or other, more important problems caused by the aftermath of the storm — it will be the first time they will use the new electronic voting machines.

If all that wasn't bad enough, the city Board of Elections, which has been known to bungle the administration of the democratic process [on more than one occasion during relatively normal circumstances](#), has been without power at its lower Manhattan headquarters since last week after it was flooded (a satellite office in Staten Island has also been closed for the same reason).

Along with the electricity went the Board's voter hotline, though people can call 311 to find out their poll sites.

The Board says its staff has been working round-the-clock to relocate polls, process absentee ballots and get the word out about the election. And, from what could be gleaned from interviews with officials and good government groups over the past few days, there was a semblance of coordination among the board, mayor's office, governor's office and federal and state officials to address the problem with voting sites.

But yesterday, after publishing what it said was the final poll list for the election, the Board updated it hours later. "There are some sites now that are viable at this minute that were not," said Board Commissioner Juan Carlos "J.C." Polanco yesterday afternoon. "In an effort to use the poll sites that were already there, we are using the ones that are there and have power and are viable."

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg, speaking at a news conference yesterday, didn't give the Board his vote of confidence.

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"Over the next day, it's going to be critical that the Board of Elections communicate this new information to their poll workers," he said. "Unfortunately, as you know, the Board has had a history of not opening all poll sites on time, and they're going to work hard to make sure that poll workers and voters know where they're supposed to go on Election Day."

He said NYC Service volunteers are helping to notify the estimated 143,000 voters in all five boroughs who were assigned new poll sites.

Valerie Vazquez, a spokeswoman for the Board, said staff was planning to distribute information at shelters about where people can vote, posting signage at old poll sites directing voters to new ones and doing full page ads in citywide and local newspapers about the poll site changes.

New Yorkers can also text "NYCVOTES" (or "DONDE") to 877-877 to receive a message on their phones with their poll site. The technology is being donated to the city by Mobile Commons.

"As New Yorkers, we came together to hold a calm, orderly election following 9/11. We will do it again in the aftermath of Sandy," said Onida Coward Mayers, director of NYC Votes!, the nonpartisan voter engagement campaign of the NYC Campaign Finance Board, in a statement. The campaign announced the text messaging software. "There will certainly be some challenges on Tuesday and it will require some patience, but it is important that all New Yorkers head to the polls to make our voices heard."

Even with these efforts, good government groups are worried that Election Day will be a mess.

Alex Camarda, the director of public policy and advocacy at Citizens Union, the sister organization of Gotham Gazette, said the Board was facing a vastly complicated election.

"I think it's going to be a Herculean task, and that the Board is going to have to bring better than their A game to pull this off without a problem," he said, adding that long lines and voter

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confusion were likely. "It's incumbent on the city and state to use their resources as well to get the word out so that we don't see fewer people voting as a result."

Turnout is a particular problem in New York City. According to [a report by the Campaign Finance Board](#) released in June, only 18 percent of voting age New Yorkers turned out to vote in the 2009 general election for mayor.

Any drop in turnout could have an effect on pivotal races for the U.S. Congress and the state Senate where candidates have suspended their campaigns in recent days to respond to the devastation in their communities on Staten Island, Queens and Brooklyn.

Ashton J. Stewart, the executive director of the League of Women Voters of New York City, said people were confused before the storm about where to vote because redistricting had relocated their poll sites.

"We were already up to our necks addressing the normal concerns with the general election," he said, worrying that turnout could be further suppressed because of the problems caused by the storm. "The people that do live in homes and are currently without power, I just don't know, I hope they still go to the polls."