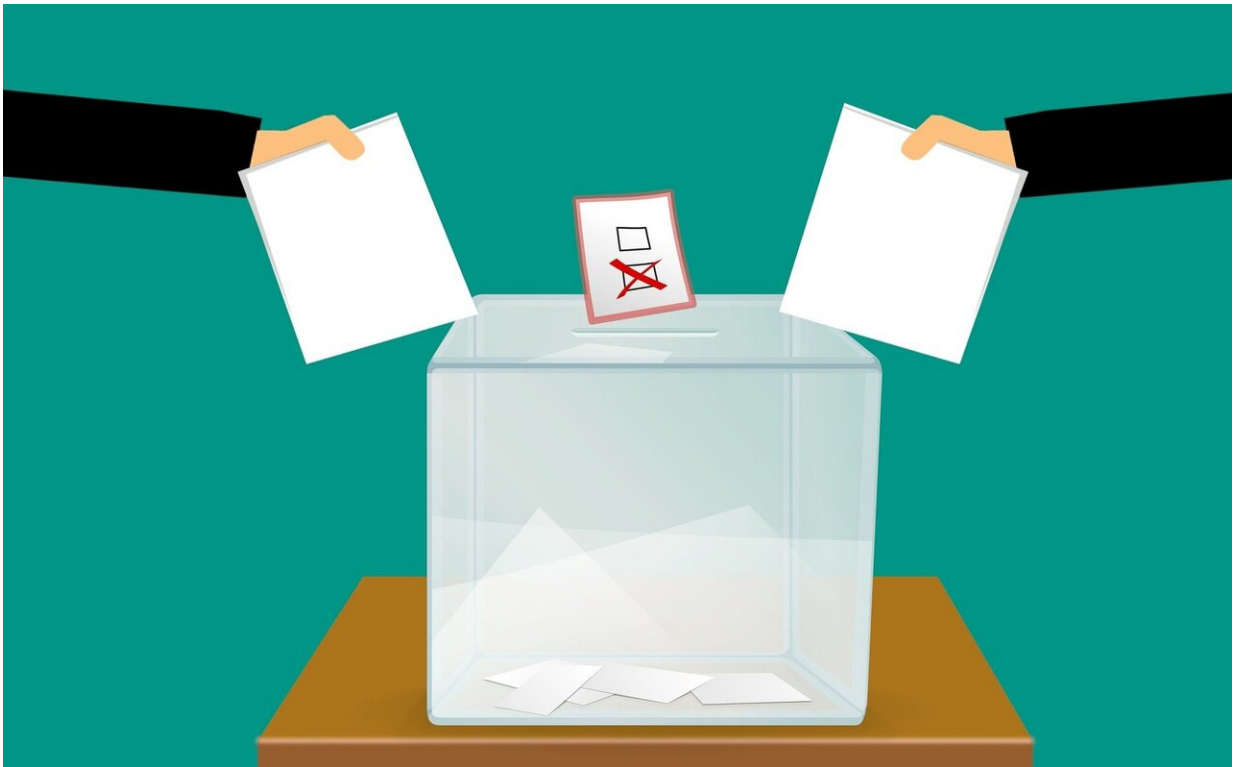


Applying human-centered design to voting places

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As the United States prepares for November's general election, almost every step of the voting process is being revamped and reevaluated to ensure that COVID-19 will not spread in local communities when millions of Americans cast their ballot in the fall.

While some states are expanding their vote-by-mail programs, many precincts are still expecting a high turnout for in-person voting.

Helping [election](#) administrators and poll workers prepare for safe in-person voting is a team at the Stanford Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, also known as the d.school. In May 2020, they partnered with the Healthy Elections Project, a joint effort between Stanford and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to develop and promote best practices for a safe and secure election this November.

"The United States is making the most fundamental transformation to its election infrastructure in the shortest period of time in recent memory," said Nathaniel Persily, the James B. McClatchy Professor Law and former Senior Research Director of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration.

"When it became clear that we needed to redesign our polling places, going to the d.school—world experts in design—was the natural place to look," added Persily, who co-founded the Healthy Elections Project with Charles Stewart III from MIT.

The d.school's task was to figure out how to apply human-centered design—an approach to finding and solving problems that put people's mindsets and behaviors at the center of the process—to designing safe polling places during a pandemic. "Elections are a series of experiences," said project collaborator Nadia Roumani, a senior designer with the d.school's Designing for Social Systems Program. "One of the things that human-centered design brings to the voting process is the ability to understand and acknowledge the complexity of that experience and, when appropriate, make it more accessible."

Toward this end, the group created the 2020 Healthy Polling Places Guidebook, a 51-page document that offers practical examples for how

to prepare a safe environment for in-person voting.

The guidebook draws its inspiration from some of the several dozen statewide primary and run-off elections that have been held across the U.S. since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. As local election administrators rethink their own voting procedures to incorporate public health recommendations like social distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19 they are turning to earlier elections to learn what worked, Roumani said.

Early on, Roumani and her colleagues at the d.school partnered with several organizations that have extensive experience working with elections officials. As Roumani learned, state and county regulations for running elections are both highly technical and incredibly decentralized. Every state, county and town administer their own elections differently.

"Part of our work has been to serve as a design coach for some of these organizations and help them take what they already have, which is robust, thorough and very detail-oriented, and make it more visual, digestible, action-oriented and experience-centered," Roumani said.

As election officials prepare for safe and clean environments for both workers and voters, the guidebook highlights dozens of examples that show what every step of the voting process has looked like so far in the pandemic. Included are photos of the signage voters saw when they entered their local polling place; the clear, plexiglass barriers they encountered when checking in; and the floor markings they followed when exiting.

Accompanying each of these images are brief but thorough descriptions of what election administrators might consider if they were to pursue one of these options, including step-by-step guidance and checklists.

The 2020 Healthy Polling Places Guidebook also features examples of what outdoor voting could look like. For example, included is an image of a tent outside the town hall from a primary election held in April in Dunn, Wisconsin, that offered people an alternative to indoor voting.

The guidebook even shows alternative examples for collecting ballots—such as curbside voting and drive-through voting—which allowed people to vote without leaving their vehicle. It also offers suggested language, links to resources administrators can use to layout their worksites and reminders for how to promote and maintain safety throughout the day. Included as well are practical tips and a training module for how to manage stressful situations that may arise, such as how to deal with a voter who forgets their face covering or refuses to wear one at all.

"The other part is understanding that there are potentially some emotional moments and anxiety-provoking moments that poll workers may face that we need to design for," Roumani said.

Preparing election officials for challenges ahead

In addition to partnering with people like Nadia Roumani and her team at the d.school, the Healthy Elections Project has collaborated with dozens of academics, civic organizations, election administrators and election administration experts to address other challenges the pandemic poses to officials and local jurisdictions, including how to expand mail-in and absentee voting programs.

While there are some states that have spent years rolling out efforts for their mail-in voting programs, other states are having to do it in a matter of months. Some jurisdictions do not have the expertise to make these changes so quickly—which is where the Healthy Election Project steps in.

"We really need the best available research to try to educate election officials, voters and NGOs on how to pull off this election in a safe and secure way," Persily said. "The goal of the healthy elections project is to really turn that research into action."

Since the Healthy Elections Project launched in April, students from Stanford and MIT have been researching and drafting relevant memos that include specific recommendations and resources to election officials making critical changes to their infrastructure. One report, for example, goes into granular detail of what supplies jurisdictions might consider purchasing to make their polling places pandemic-proof, what they might need to expand vote-by-mail programs, as well as timelines to avoid bottlenecks in the supply chain.

As the election draws closer, the Healthy Election Project will continue to prepare and provide elections administrators with additional tools and resources to manage issues that may arise, such as managing mail ballots, analyzing election data and communicating with voters. There is also a growing amount of litigation regarding election rules during the pandemic, and the Healthy Elections Project is tracking these as well to keep election officials and voters up-to-date of issues in their jurisdictions.

"It's incredibly difficult during the pandemic to try to effectuate changes in election administration across the country, but we are trying to do our best," said Persily. "We hope that we're making at least a small contribution to make it a smoother election."

Provided by Stanford University

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